

GRAND JUNCTION

MAURICE G. DANTEC



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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BABYLON BABIES
COSMOS INCORPORATED

GRAND JUNCTION

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BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK



These teachings bring us the knowledge of what is the end of Mankind as a specific end, meaning the vision and fruition of God, considered according to the details that make this end desirable: the fact that it will be gained, after the resurrection, by immortal man, both in his soul and in his body, forever.

—JOHN DUNS SCOTUS, PROLOGUE TO THE *ORDINATIO*

Electricity resembles an effort on the part of matter to become spirit. One might say that matter, through electricity, tries to achieve ecstasy.

—ERNEST HELLO

PART ONE

EMPIRE

To wish to destroy the worst in the universe is to destroy Providence
itself.

—PLOTINUS

Evil has nothing in common with existence; it cannot create, because its
strength is purely negative. Evil is the schism of being; it is not real.

—JOSEPH DE MAISTRE

1 > RADIOHEAD

The organ is linked to the machine.

The organ: five fingers, a hand.

The machine: six strings, a metal beam.

A metal beam that vibrates with electricity coming from the copper coil attached to its base.

The hand, full of its own nervous electric impedance, moves along the taut strings of the long metal beam.

The six strings vibrate rhythmically under the pressure of the five fingers. The strings are attached to a body.

An electric body.

A guitar.

This body-machine produces sounds and has its own name. It even has a past, which in this world amounts to a virtual miracle.

Better still, under the hand that moves in the electrified space of the metallic strings, under the five fingers that spread starlike amid the harmonic notes, this body-machine also has a future—an even rarer commodity than a past.

We are in the Afterworld. The World After the World. And in this world, only the hand moving on the metal strings to produce sounds, to bring forth a voice, only this hand knows how to make machines sing.

It is the Healing Hand.

It is the organ that gives new life to that which has never been alive. It is the antimachine that grants the favor of Grace to the machines, though they are dying and disappearing at the same time as the creature that conceived them.

So the hand plays; it plays on the body-machine of the guitar.

And the guitar sings; it sings its own electric body.

Its electric body boasts the double coil characteristic of its make. This machine has its own name: *Gibson Les Paul, 1954 model*. This guitar has

its own body. And *a body has this guitar*. A human body. He holds it between his hands, hands that run over its surface and make it sing in a multitude of magnetic frequencies.

This guitar is an *instrument*, and he knows what that involves: injection sense/etymology in electric language. *Instrumentum*, in the language that was sacred for two millennia, from the word *instruere*, “to build inside,” and by extension: to develop an *instruction* for a human being. Via its Indo-European roots, it means “operation capable of acting on the physical world.”

Nor is the instrument an object; it is really a piece of technology, a language, a machine. *Mēkhanē*: a *war machine*, according to its Greek origins, it indicates the existence of an operative action that will permit the development of another machine. Flash introduction to the semantics of the *organum*, more or less meaning “organism”: in this sacred language, which disappeared well before most of the others, every instrument bears within it the *organum* of which it is the mechanical hand; every instrument is an organic multiplex; *every instrument is a body* and the man who creates or repairs it is thus an *organarius*. An *organist*. A *doctor*.

And that is what he is: *a doctor for electric machines*. And this instrument, this guitar, is a *body-machine*.

Volume level 10 on the amplifier, a 100-watt Marshall from the 1970s. A century old; a rarity. The riff resonates heavenward, swallowing the near-universe up in a pure shockwave of white noise, full of ferocity, at once glacial and incandescent, a thermonuclear bomb. Electricity at the fingertips—and at the other end, a human body taut with pure joy, the kind that sparkles like a snowflake falling to rest at the corner of the lips, the joy of hearing the guitar sing, become one with its electric life; the joy of virtually seeing jets of brilliant light rocket into the night sky, the sky filled with stars but cut off from Earth, the sky where no one can hear you scream. Where no one can even hear you laugh anymore.

The body holding the guitar in its hands has a name, too. It exists, just as much as the body-machine whose voice it is coaxing forth from the atomic depths of the material.

This human body has a voice. An identity. A name. A body. The verb. He exists.

He exists, and while the guitar vibrates between his hands, while he produces a simple E-major tune inverted to the Larsen effect, while it seems to him that the saturated sound wave will lodge itself in the very celestial vault like an acoustic rocket speeding toward Arcturus or the Pleiades, while all this machinery takes life, he, his body, his voice, his identity, and the voice, body, and identity of the instrument, even while the music cascades from his brain already perfectly formed—this time David Bowie’s “The Jean Genie”—while the final tune dissipates in the burning oscillation of feedback, his human body finally raises its head in the direction of the world, the “real world,” the world of men. Not the world of the stars enveloped in the music of the body-machine, or the world of the body-machine connected to the stars by light, by radiating electricity.

No. The world in between the two.

The Middle World. The *Centerworld*, now a satellite of itself.

The place where everything mankind has known for thousands of years of civilization has been, or is being, destroyed forever.

And the funniest thing, the human body observing the World muses, is that this terminal disintegration is happening although its very source has vanished. Mankind allowed itself to become enslaved by Machines even as it used them to satisfy its desires. It knowingly permitted itself to become co-mechanized. It became an integral part of the trap that is by definition hidden in every machine, especially when that machine has become a World. When the Machine-World somehow programmed its own disappearance, it began to push everything that remained of humanity in its universal matrix toward the abyss.

Becoming part of a trap isn’t the best way to escape it.

The human body observing the World realizes that he is not alone. There is another person here, in front of him, just outside the hangar where the amplifier still growls loudly.

He knows this person. It is a friend. One of the few friends he has in this world.

It is a man.

One of the last.

“Yuri? Have you been there long?”

The young man called Yuri moves toward the young man with the electric guitar, a thin smile splitting his face in the quicksilver moonlight. His red hair waves around his head in a crown of soft curls. His eyes are a sparkling, iridescent green, like the skin of an anaconda. He is barely twenty-two years old, with the pale skin of a young Soviet killer, a sniper for a division lost to the stars. Yuri has never killed anyone, but everything about him suggests that he would be quite capable of doing it. Very calmly.

He studied medicine in school.

"I've been here since the first song. Bowie. 'The Jean Genie.' Right?"

"Yes," says the young man with the guitar. "I've been able to play it since this morning."

"Did it come to you in a dream, as usual?"

The young man with the guitar doesn't reply. It's obvious. Both of them already know it.

"You've got the whole thing? Tune, title, composer, words, even the original edition of the record?"

"What do you want me to say, Yuri? You know it always happens like that."

"I know. I'm waiting to see if the process changes one day."

"Why would it?"

"Nothing's sure in this universe. Especially these days."

Yuri's eyes are full of emerald light. A spark kindles in his gaze just then, as if lightning is scanning the field of his consciousness.

Under the sky filled with all the stars of the Milky Way, the young man with the electric guitar observes the World. The Middle World. And in the middle of the World, his friend Yuri McCoy is sending him a message, a signal, maybe an involuntary one. A purely optical form of anguish, but also the almost diabolical gleam of excitement in the face of the unknown.

Something is happening in Junkville, thinks the young man with the guitar, *or maybe at Omega Blocks. To the south, at any rate, where Yuri comes from.*

Something is happening in the human spillway of the old city cosmodrome, in the anthropological garbage dump that was once the Territory of Grand Junction.

Something is happening there again, he corrects himself.

Above his head, in a myriad of luminescent questions, the stars seem to await some extraordinary event.

The first catastrophe has already happened, he thinks. Be patient.

* * *

“When did it start?”

The voice of the young man with the guitar rises above the polymetallic alloy struts supporting the hangar’s roof like the nave of an anodized cathedral.

The two young men sit on the antique rear seats of a gasoline-powered Chevrolet from the previous century, in the midst of an odd assortment of musical instruments of all types and origins—guitars, of course, but also a vast collection of electronic and acoustic pianos, including a Bösendorfer pianoforte and a very old church organ whose gilded pipes stand along the metal walls, a tubular harrow erected toward the sky obscured by its carbonic vault. A small biophosphorescent lamp glows in the center of a Recyclo concrete cubicle between them, illuminating several square meters of the vast room with yellow-white light.

Yes, thinks the young man with the Hand that Heals Machines. Something is definitely happening in Junkville. Something is continuing the work that has been going on for years already. Something is determined to make every trace of humanity disappear from this world.

“We don’t have any statistical data, of course, but according to my sources it’s been talked about since last month. The year is ending in less than three weeks. If you ask me, it must have started in October.”

“October. Of course.”

Yuri McCoy is impassive. His smile remains fixed, intangible, on his face, splitting his flesh like the mouth opening of a battle mask.

“The anniversary of the destruction of the Metastructure twelve years ago,” continues the young man with the guitar. “Have you seen any specific examples with your own eyes?”

“Yes, two just last week. That’s what made me come looking for you.”

“But you seem to be saying I can’t do anything about it this time.”

“Right. At first glance, at least. I told you, the *thing* isn’t hunting machines or biocontained systems anymore.”

No, thinks the man living in the hangar. The thing is no longer interested only in the artificial devices that helped humanity to survive for so long even as they subjugated it to their own existence. In an impromptu and, for

now, completely incomprehensible manner, it has managed—like a virus—to jump from one species to another.

Now it is attacking men directly. And even better, it is attacking what it defines as men.

“You know,” remarks Yuri, “it seems a little like the first mutation. Do you remember it, or were you still too young?”

“The first mutation? When even machines that had never been connected to the Metastructure were affected, though it had been dead since ’57?”

“Yes. That was when some of us began to ask ourselves serious questions that have still never been answered. Remember what everyone living in Heavy Metal Valley says?”

“Tell me.”

“That you’re the answer, or that you carry it inside you. The proof is tangible. How else have you been able to repair machines and biosystems since you were seven years old?”

Yuri McCoy’s gaze sweeps around the objects stacked in the hangar—all the machines kept here in this storehouse; music, the giving of new life to sonorous electricity, vanished with everything else, is only the tip of the iceberg.

“It was only the year before I turned seven that the mutation, as you call it, took place. I remember it perfectly. Until then, only computers, machines, and biosystems that had been linked to the MegaNetwork were affected.”

“Yes, and all of a sudden on a lovely October morning the first entirely new machines, even the ones born well after the death of the Metastructure, and the ones that had never been connected to it, began to be affected in their turn. Same for biocontained systems. Only the ones you’ve healed are still resistant to the ‘virus.’ Apparently they’re still safe from all that up in the Ring, too.”

“I know. But you haven’t answered my question. So a second mutation is supposedly coming? Tell me about the two cases you saw.”

“I really believe the Nothingness is using the Metastructure as a tool to destroy not only mankind but any possible successor to it.”

“We’re in perfect agreement on that point, and you know it. The two cases, please?”

“They’re almost identical, just a little different in terms of the contamination process. They are losing the use of language.”

“I know. You just told me that. They’re becoming aphasic, is that it?”

Yuri’s smile remains suspended in the pale gravity of his face like the harbinger of an imminent, quiet cataclysm. His eyes seek out those of the young man with the guitar.

“It’s worse than that. Much worse.”

* * *

Yuri McCoy is right. It is much worse than amnesia, the loss of all memory. It is the chaotic falsification of memory. Dementia.

And it is much worse than aphasia. The *thing*, at first, drove the Control Metastructure to its own destruction. No one knew how it happened, really, but October 4, 2057, remained throughout what was left of human history as the fatal date, the day when the immense biocybernetic network that controlled the development of what was then called Human UniWorld had been contaminated by itself.

Immediately afterward, all the machines linked to the global megasystem had been stricken by the regressive process that made them run backward. In a few months, most of the electronic devices on the surface of the planet were reduced to silence, or more precisely, consigned to pure machine language, simple groupings of ones and zeros, deprived of all other means of communicating with one another or their human users; all interfaces annihilated, all programming language rendered unintelligible, all memory erased, all operational mechanisms blocked forever or put into continuous loops with themselves.

Then, one beautiful day, when the mechanical healing powers with which he was blessed were fully revealed to him, the young man from the hangar had heard his parents gravely discussing a “new phase” in the “process.” A few weeks later, they had told him that now any machine, even those manufactured from uncontaminated components, was condemned to a more or less brief working life.

Electricity, his mother had said to him. Most Holy Electricity. Even that was now threatened by this machine disease. “Every computerized machine is built using binary laws of Boolean mathematics,” his father had put in. “The disappearance of the Metastructure was a mechanical thing—but paradoxically, it continues to exist in a negative but active mode. Some of us think the Control Metastructure chose its own death as a metamorphic

tool. By breaking down, it also broke down humanity and thus achieved its goal. Now it is changing to another configuration, another form, and we are seeing only the embryonic version of it.”

It was then that he had told his parents he might be in a position to do something about this problem.

“During the first stage,” says Yuri, “diseases present symptoms of known psychiatric pathologies. Sporadic memory loss, possible problems with orientation ... then the signs of linguistic malfunction appear. The first case I saw was at Omega Blocks. District 17, a refugee from Quebec. He was already in an advanced stage of the disease. He still had a perfect vocabulary and knew all the grammatical rules of French, but his sentences no longer made any sense at all; the syntactic structure was completely garbled—verbs, subjects, pronouns, object complements, adjectives—no logical order at all anymore. Everything was mixed up. Like Texto-Gensys software with completely random parameters. I saw him again a few days later, and he was even worse. He could only produce sequences of vowels and consonants, and those pretty much continuously.”

“I see,” the young man with the guitar says, simply.

It is much worse than silence, which would certainly not suit the process trying now to destroy the last machine—Man.

It is more demonic than the absence of language. It is the terminal mechanization of language. And Yuri has just given him a perfect illustration of it.

“The second case lives in Junkville. Well, maybe ‘lives’ isn’t the right word. It looks like the terminal stage of contamination. I can’t confirm that, of course, but it looks like it. The man won’t live much longer.”

“What is it?”

“The after-phase. The stage after language. What is secretly sending it out into the universe. *Numbers*.”

“Numbers?”

“Yes. Try to remember. The Control Metastructure was in control for around thirty years. It froze the Grand Jihad and the various interethnic conflicts in Europe, the American civil wars, the war in central Asia, et cetera. To maintain and expand its regime, it created the UHU—Human UniWorld—the successor to the United Nations. It pacified the world, and

managed to co-mechanize mankind completely. What the *thing*, the Post-Machine, if you will, is doing is flattening everything into the same level of equipotence, reducing everything to a common denominator, but without needing any ‘interface’ or any positive pseudoreality. It is a sort of ‘negative Metastructure’; it doesn’t kill language, it causes it to survive at its zero point. It mechanizes it to incorporate it into man, so that he will regress completely along with the general devolution, like all the machines. And for this mission to succeed, it is converting everything into numeric language. Do you follow me?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Becoming co-mechanized and then de-mechanizing without having developed as a human being will kill a man, *but he will die like a machine*. It’s the ultimate trap of technology.”

“I understand all that, Yuri. Tell me why you came to see me.”

“The man I saw in Junkville could only talk in sequences of binary numbers, at crazily high speed and without stopping, day and night. He didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, and was barely able to drink a few rations of water each day. And when I saw him again two days ago ... God, when I saw him again! He wasn’t a man anymore.”

“What was he, then?”

“A modem. He was reeling off numeric binary code at the speed of a turn-of-the-century modem. My God, he would open his mouth and this noise came out, you know, like digital white noise, the sound of 128 kilobits of information per second, coming directly from his larynx. Tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow, he’ll be dead.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I took all kinds of samples and did some in vivo tests. When people go into this numeric phase, all the cells in their nervous systems become empty. The cellular information is ejected vocally just before the destruction of the nerve cell.”

The gray-eyed gaze of the young man with the guitar wanders over the machines arranged and stacked in the hangar.

They are the result of years of research, of bartering, of work, of contribution.

He has traded the use of his Healing Hand—on a defective pacemaker, a contaminated neurocomputer, a malfunctioning robotic lung, an antiviral-protein nanogenerator, a vision amplifier, an artificial sex organ, a

tomographic scanner, a MemoCard implant, a simple shortwave radio—for a few specialized Rickenbacker transistors or the instruction manual of a last-century digital synthesizer.

But even as he began to offer his gifts to what remained of humanity down here in the Territory of Grand Junction, men were dropping like flies all over the planet.

At the time, there were still a few working television sets in Heavy Metal Valley; he had seen images dating from the first year after the End of the Machine: men and women, brought down in a single stroke in the streets of the last surviving metropolises, like during the siege of Leningrad.

SMACK! A vaguely humanoid sack of rags topples abruptly to the ground. A body falls onto the sidewalk—in the middle of the street—against the wall of a bank or a metro station—against a basement window—onto the hood of a car—against the steering wheel of a bus or a train—at a restaurant table—at a store’s checkout counter—in the midst of a crowd that automatically steps over and around it, collectively intelligent but knowing that nothing can be done for the man or woman who has just fallen.

In Grand Junction alone, it was estimated that 40 percent of individuals with biocontained systems were contaminated and as a result would either die or be severely and permanently handicapped. The *body tuner* city of Neon Park was practically erased from the map, more deftly than if the neighboring nuclear plant had exploded.

Very quickly, the city cosmodrome had been emptied of half its population, either by mass death or “voluntary” emigration. The strongly protected launch facilities had remained in operation a few months at most before they broke down in their turn.

As the years passed, this postmechanical biocide had grown. Calmly. Like a production schedule, with its quotas, balance sheets, accounting, methodology. The religious wars and various politico-ethnic conflicts that had erupted, without any police or humanitarian order capable of controlling them, into a bloody profusion of abominations of every type, sputtered out one after the other like the last bonfires of the end of the world, for lack of combatants, operating materials, weapons, ammunition, fuel, and, in the end, desire.

The Mohawk municipal authorities had managed to scavenge some new devices—never connected to the Metastructure—and had then tried to

relaunch the space activities on which the Territory's entire economy depended.

There was a slight shiver of hope during the year marking the centennial of Yuri Gagarin's flight, but two years later, under the absolutely unforeseen impact of the first postmortem mutation, *all* electronic machines had broken down irreparably. This time, the cosmodrome had closed its doors for good.

Six years old at the time, he had watched on the last few remaining television screens in operation as entire cities were wiped from the map, enormous migrant populations following them into the abyss like errant colonies of lemmings annihilating themselves in silence. Every day, everywhere, millions of human beings died, felled by the abrupt malfunction of a nanocomponent or a vital implant. Everywhere. All the time. Without even the smallest pause.

Grand Junction was petrified forever in the silica and the hot southern wind, like a riparian forest made of metallic alloy and carbon-carbon.

A dozen rockets stood ready for launch in the hangars, without a chance of ever leaving the soil of Earth.

The cosmodrome and the city around it slowly crumbled into the dunes pushing coastward from the Midwest and central Canada.

Yuri McCoy has departed into the night on his antique, gasoline-powered Kawasaki.

The young man with the guitar watches as he vanishes toward the south, then stands another long moment in the warehouse doorway, eyes raised toward the Milky Way.

Something terrible is going to happen.

Again, here, in Grand Junction.

A *thing*, both invisible and hypervisible; paradoxically a non-being and a superexistent one, located everywhere and nowhere. The Post-Machine, as Yuri called it, is trying to take what remains of humanity along with it in its implacable postmortem metamorphosis.

And he is the only man that has had the power to fight against this force in years, this force born of the destruction of the human world, and pursuing further destruction with all its might. Now, he imagines, it is seeking not just the destruction of the human world but the destruction of *everything*. It seems to prefer keeping mankind as an *infinitely destructible* entity to

simply destroying it. Death is only a means, a medium, a simple, uncontrollable accident. *It is the erasure of all creative thought that it seeks.*

He is alone. Alone against the Post-Machine, which annihilates machines to better incorporate them into men.

Alone. Like a lone man facing an army of wild bulldozers.

And he isn't even a man.

2 > *STATION TO STATION*

He isn't even a man.

He is hardly more than a child.

He was born the very day of the Cataclysm. He had been found in a place called Deadlink, an abandoned highway interchange, after a group of Canadian refugees passed through. Then he had been taken to Heavy Metal Valley, to the home of the people who would become his adoptive parents.

He is twelve years old. And this twelve-year-old boy is looking at himself in the long exterior rearview mirror from a construction vehicle. He sees his organic structure, suspended in the dim light of the trailer, reflected in two pieces in front of a window with the shades drawn.

This young man is twelve years old, and he already knows he is ancient, with at least two millennia behind him. He knows his birth is hiding a secret, a probably unknowable one, and that this secret can shed light on the demonic mystery that is taking possession of the world and now using the brains of men as its language-machine.

He knows that the crushing weight of a stellar destiny is lying on his fragile shoulders; the weight of a future that is passing him by, a life he will not live, but that will consume him.

He is twelve years old. He is the Healing Hand for electric bodies. He is also the eye that sees in the dark.

He knows.

In the mirror he sees a rather puny boy with skin so translucent that the veins can be seen underneath it like delicate blue lace and a shining crown of platinum blond hair, and gray eyes that observe everything, eyes whose pupils are shot through with tawny streaks, like the enigmatic fingerprint of some fire from before his birth. This is probably also the signature of the secret optic system that allows him to see even in total blackness.

He is the young man with the guitar. He touched his first electric instrument at around three years old. To the utter astonishment of his

parents and the friends present on that day, he had been able from first contact with the thing to coax harmonic sounds from it, even a simple series of tunes.

More surprising still: “Good Lord,” one of the guests had exclaimed. “I thought this old Telecaster stopped working twenty years ago!”

At the time, neither he nor anyone else had understood what was happening. It was only later that he realized the full import of the strange power he seemed to be able to conduct. He had just turned six years old when he began secretly experimenting with the neuroinductive repair of contaminated electronic systems, tucked away in some hidden spot in Heavy Metal Valley. The next year, after months and months of practice, he had calmly announced the news to his parents, and had given them a demonstration of his talents.

His father had immediately sworn him to absolute secrecy about the nature of his powers.

Like any secret, it had required men to keep it.

And men are fallible.

About two years ago, the rumor permeated the entire Mohawk Territory, even Junkville.

And very quickly, the requests had begun to pour in.

Unable to sleep, he leaves the trailer—his parents’ mobile home, now plunged into the dark of night like all of HMTV with its thousands of twentieth-century vehicle carcasses, all its makeshift shelters built of scavenged parts from cars, buses, trucks, bulldozers, and caravans, metal and Plexiglas sparkling silver in the moonlight, the photovoltaic cells mounted on every roof hoisting protective rectangular cobalt shields against the fires in the sky.

And yet the greatest threat to humanity is just about to descend.

Here, upon Grand Junction, the place everything has abandoned.

Yuri was very clear: *This time, your powers probably won’t be of any use. This isn’t a virus, as we so often use the term. It is something, a force, born of the Metastructure—or, rather, of its destruction. It is an inverted emanation of it. It doesn’t attack the biological or the mechanical.*

Neither the biological nor the mechanical, but what is in between them, he says to himself.

The *thing*, this “metavirus” born of the Metastructure’s self-contamination, now has only one target. Human language. And, more precisely, *language in any form*.

What can anyone do against a force that transforms *logos* into numbered communication, into pure machine language?

What can anyone do to fight an unknown power that attacks not the biological or the mechanical but the symbolic?

What can he do against this Post-Machine, for which the myth of Babel would be a pleasant farce?

What can he do? He, all alone, twelve years and two millennia old, against an entity that knows neither future nor past nor even any form of present? Without Presence, without Memory, without Destiny; it is everything and nothing all at once; it has destroyed the machines, and in so doing has exterminated almost four billion human beings. But death is only an accidental by-product for it, a transitory problem through which it must pass, that’s all. *Fatum*.

For now it seems to have completed its metamorphosis, like a chrysalis in the last phase of its transformation.

He realizes, suddenly chilled with fear that not even the soft starlight can ease, that everything that happened before the End of the Machine and its current consequences—the whole century and the one preceding it—formed the invisible matrix of what will soon be unleashed on the rest of humanity, like the most terrifying apocalyptic Flood of all.

He walks. He passes the high columns of stacked, smashed steel-and-plastic carcasses. He passes the lines of antique but still-operating gasoline-powered cars, the piles of engines and mechanical parts, the rows of buses and pickup trucks. He crosses Bulldozer Park, then the wide span of Jeep Avenue, where, in the distance, he can see the imposing bulk of an enormous cosmodrome rover that HMOV’s sheriff and his men scavenged shortly after the facility’s spatial activities had been shut down. Just beyond it, the great helixes of windmills whirl on the summits of the surrounding mesas, vast moon-white quadrants whose blades sketch high, rotating crosses as they swish through the night air.

Farther away to his left, beyond the city limits, the massive silhouette of the local Catholic church towers skyward. Its immense aluminum cross,

built from the remnants of a luxury autocar cruiser, has withstood more than one group of Islamists come to practice its razzias in the Independent Territory. There is still religion, and there is still war.

After the fall of the Metastructure, all the beliefs, rites, and divinities of Human UniWorld disappeared. From the Death of God, the world had moved on to the industrial superproduction of idols and religious kits—for everything, the “unified everything” that controlled the Machine-World, had crumbled; even the last Islamic emirates scattered across the globe had finally fallen apart. There is nothing left now but a world deserted by its machines, of which man is the last representation, on the point of giving way itself to something else yet unknown.

There is nothing left but a world that is becoming a desert, where the Post-Machine waits like a scorpion hidden beneath the sand, ready to inject its venom into every man within reach.

He walks alone, like a being just emerged from a meteorite fallen to Earth. He walks under the ghostly reverberation of the moon and the stars. Here, for him, the night is as bright as a summer afternoon; he doesn't see as well during the daytime. For a long time now, he has seen much better at night.

The night seems like his natural domain, yet nothing in his constitution warns him against sun exposure either; despite his luminously pale skin he is much more resistant to the pernicious effects of the ultraviolet light than most of the humans he knows.

He isn't a vampire or a werewolf, even though he isn't completely a man, either. Night, for him, is a sort of *hyperday*, a special moment when the moonlight, which is actually the light of our single sun, together with that of distant stars, diffused by myriad constellations in the vault of the sky, becomes a source of new impulses, as if some cerebral photosynthesis is taking place in his head every time he absorbs a new dose of photons from the Milky Way.

This light is a language for him. Better still, it is pure music, a coming together of radio waves in stellar collision, nuclear rhythms of hearts in fusion, brandishing their millions of degrees centigrade, cerebrospinal toward the breath of supernovas, melancholic dispersion of the distant emissions of a quasar, imperturbable leitmotifs of pulsars and neutron stars, whirling in time to the implacable will of some cosmic Karajan. The music of black holes, really, whose presence is indicated by jets of matter and light

that fuse in the fraction of a second at the moment of their disruption in the nothingness, like the clash of electromagnetic cymbals signaling the imminent and always recommencing end of the very sonority of the universe.

He has become aware, in using his hands to heal machines, in saving the electric bodies from their own self-destruction, that it is *inside* him that this light shines, though timidly yet. He realized it only this summer, in an unprecedented blinding flash: he is an antenna, an antenna connected to the cosmos. He relates to the light from the sky because he is himself a fragment of this light. And if the machines allow themselves to be cared for by him in their agony, though he is not a human being, it is because he shares with them a tiny bit of pure inhumanity, a tiny bit of beauty with nothing at all earthly about it, an instant of life beyond life, somewhere in the quantum chant of elementary particles.

It must be long past midnight.

He has passed to the other side of the hyperday. He is now in the Dark Face of the Light.

And he understands now. Yes, he has realized it as if instantaneously frozen in the liquid helium of truth. It is as blinding as a flash, as deep as an abyss, as hard and precise as the blade of a scalpel.

He understands that that which has just entered its ultimate mutation, this postmechanical entity born of the decomposition of the Metastructure, this *thing* without name, without form, without place, without true existence, is ontologically his enemy.

It is his enemy. Therefore, he is its enemy as well.

That means that what has been happening in Junkville for the last month or two is only the prelude to the true offensive. A war is on the point of being declared. A war between him and the *thing*. A war of total and complete extermination. There will be only one victor, and no mercy.

He understands that he is far from ready for such a war.

He doesn't even know if he will be able to fight.

He has arrived at the city limits. The city of Heavy Metal. In this region, located in the northernmost part of the Territory, the desert of the continental center gives way to a semiarid steppe where a few plants live on

the scant humidity coming from the Saint Lawrence and what remains of Lake Ontario; a few shrubs, evergreen brush, a handful of scrawny cedars. He walks on a sparse carpet of wild grass scattered with reeds, *Liatris spicata* with its white flowers, wild oats, several species of chickweed, all kinds of wild grasses, chenopods, dock plants, brambles, wild roses, hawthorn, viperina, stinging weeds, bloodwort, cowbane with its oily, highly poisonous sap, night-flowering catchfly, Canadian fleabane, red-rooted amaranth, white lychnis, ranunculus, false cheiranthus, orange hieracium, chicory and wild mustard, passerage densiflore and other crucifers, witchgrass, myrtle spurge, masked pansies and forget-me-nots, epine vinette, poisonous sumac, and various cacti—all these plants; vibrant, spiny, parasitic, often toxic, put down roots wherever they please in rhizomes, bunches, and bouquets; in wildlands, peat bogs, in alkaline, calcareous, acidic, or loamy soil, and in the semiarid savannas of the Territory, where they have already replaced most of the original vegetation. He walks on the world's last plants, heading toward the rocky mesas that surround the city, on which rest the starlike shapes of the windmills whirling in their slow ballet. Xenon Ridge, for example, which dominates the south and west, from which one can see the dried-out buttes of Monolith Hills, the sand-scoured expanses of the old cosmodrome and the ghost town of Grand Junction outlined in relief against them, swept by clouds of dust and the round tangles of errant tumbleweeds.

The cosmodrome has been laid bare, like pure archaeology. The death of the electronic machines destroyed forever any hope of scorching the desert again with the fire of tailpipes, the apocalyptic screaming of engines, the flaming spheres sparkling in the high atmosphere.

It is no longer possible even to imagine anyone returning somehow from the Orbital Ring; all those on Earth know about it is that it miraculously survived the End of the Metastructure.

All routes between earth and sky have been cut off. There is no more sky for the earth, no earth for the sky. No more radio communications, no more satellite positioning, no more laser beams or microwaves. No more anything.

How great it must have been, since the conquest of space was still one of the last collective dreams humanity cherished for itself. How impressive it must have been, this city in the middle of nowhere, this northern Las Vegas of orbital travel, with a new ecology, rapid, enthusiastic, implacable. The

MagLev aerostation, for example, the most state-of-the-art technology of its time, now just a vast, dark, empty shell, whose suspension monorails lead nowhere except the dunes blown in from the American Midwest and the semidesert steppes of central Canada.

How beautiful it must have been, this world where man and machines lived together, in peacetime and wartime, facing the same dangers in the depths of a jungle or on the peaks of desolate mountains, killing one another only in the animated graphic of a television screen, this world where electrons were free, this world where light permitted one to see the invisible, and to kill without being seen.

How full of hope it must have been, with the century just beginning, and the planetary civil war only in its infancy.

Yes, he says to himself as he crosses the last few meters separating him from the high carbon-carbon pylon of a windmill whose blades cut through the air with an insectlike hum. How good it must have been, how easy, how delicious, to live in a time when men died by their own hands, lived in fear of one another, thought freely with every fiber of their beings.

Now the hand that kills is no longer human, nor is it mechanical. Today, the “other” no longer exists; rather, it is the metastatic proliferation of the “same” that has replaced it. Now there is no prison except humanity itself, free from any attachment.

The towers and launch platforms of the abandoned cosmodrome rise like brown coal totems above the mirrored white sand glowing in the moonlight.

There is nothing left in this world.

Nothing really alive.

Except the *thing*.

The thing that annihilates languages, and whose progression seems to echo the expansion of the desert that stretches to his feet.

In this world, there are no more machines. There are almost no more men. There is nothing but the desert.

The endlessly growing desert.

Silence blankets the star-filled night with a translucent veil that holds everything in a state of infinite suspension. Billions and billions of stars are scattered like gold dust just above the sand-covered cosmodrome, like a terrible and mocking invitation extended to a paraplegic prospector.

The silence does not come from the desert, which now stretches from the city of Grand Junction to the state of New York, and which has engulfed almost the entire Mohawk Territory in the space of a dozen years. The silence does not come from the Earth, even as desolate and abandoned by men as it now is.

The silence falls from the sky. It is the fossil radiation of cosmic song; it is what remains of the postimpact shock wave, and it is all the contained potential from the moment before it. It is an *integral part* of the music, much more than an interruption.

The silence is such—here on Xenon Ridge, as he turns his back to Heavy Metal Valley and gazes at the luminescent waves of sand, swept to and fro by gusts of wind against the launch-control towers—the silence is such, so mineral, so solid, that he feels as if he might take it in his hands like a rock fallen from the moon.

The idea comes to him that silence is matter. And even that only matter is silent. And that only silence is material.

The silence is of an unfathomable depth that superimposes itself on that of the celestial vault; the silence is a structural density capable of physical movement at any time.

The silence is the echo of everything that could not be said, and that might be said.

The silence breathes.

The silence is this breathing. This breathing that whispers in his ears.

This breathing that comes from just behind him.

This breathing that he has just recognized, even before he hears the voice break the silence enshrouding the stars:

“Good evening, Gabriel.”

It is the breathing of a human being. It is the voice of a girl.

The voice of a girl whose beauty could extinguish the sun.

Judith Sevigny has just turned seventeen. Her long, silky black hair sparkles with a million tiny glitters of starlight. She is tall, slender, her feminine curves perfectly made but nearly eclipsed by the extraordinary beauty of her ivory face with its slight amber tint—its eyes, bluer than the heart of a flame; its delicate bones; its oval brow and triangular chin; its fine lines and prominent cheekbones; its straight nose, slightly upturned at the tip; its mouth, whose pink-orange tint needs no cosmetic assistance, designed as it might have been by a Renaissance master. She is like an oasis

of beauty that hardly makes sense in a universe completely deprived of both.

He turns as slowly as a stone; as always in her presence, a pair of pliers seems to be gripping and twisting his abdominal organs.

In a soft voice—*too soft*, he thinks—he says: “Judith. What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

She laughs, and it is like a crystal hurled from the Earth to be lost among the stars.

Her laugh, he thinks, is like no other laugh he has ever heard. This mouth open with the music of thought, these eyes that shine starry blue.

“Gabriel,” says the voice, still merry with laughter. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He forces a smile. He hardly dares to look her full in the face. He is weaker in her presence than he could ever be with the *thing* from Junkville, he thinks.

“I came to look at the cosmodrome,” he says, only half lying.

“It’s almost three o’clock in the morning. Do your parents know you’re out?”

“No,” he admits. “But I wasn’t planning on crossing the ridge, and besides, I’m going back.” He turns and begins walking north, toward the bottom of the mesa, his pace slow, almost reluctant, until she catches up and falls into step very naturally—too naturally—beside him.

“They’re saying someone came from Junkville to see you last night.”

“Yes,” he says, “it was Yuri.”

“Ah! Has he found a new contract for you?”

He doesn’t reply. Above them, the Milky Way spreads out its veil of stars, and a light, fresh breeze blows from northern Quebec, from what remains of the Arctic.

“What will you have to do this time, Gabriel, repair an antique IBM mainframe or an artificial vagina? A hydrogen battery or a lysergic acid neuro-implant?”

He can hear the dry amusement in her words, barely covered by the soft tones of her voice. She often sounds like that, he muses.

He doesn’t know if he should share with her the secret that Yuri McCoy has just told him. He doesn’t know what to do at all. Should he alert the HMY city council? Sheriff Langlois? Should he tell his parents? What about Father Newman?

Yuri has left him with many more questions than answers.

Right now, he is still in shock. A second mutation of the End of the Machine is in progress—and this time, it could be the last operative phase before the total destruction of all thinking life on Earth.

Maybe Judith Sevigny can handle hearing the truth. Maybe she can help him, or just give him some advice.

But—can he do anything but think?

His heart is beating, as always in her presence, not just faster or harder but more deeply—at least that's how it seems. It is his entire being, throbbing in a tachycardiac rhythm that continues as they approach the first automobile carcasses of Heavy Metal Valley.

He decides to keep the truth from her. For now.

“A series of nanogenerator antiviral implants. It should be enough for me to pay for this Drumulator synthesizer and the Flying V I repaired for that Neon Park refugee.”

“No one ever would have guessed that HMTV would one day become a museum of twentieth-century electric music,” she says, with her soft, clear laugh.

He only smiles, not really looking at her. They have come within sight of Cadillac Avenue.

“They wouldn't have imagined that all this music could be recorded in the brain of a single human being, either,” she persists.

The young man keeps the smile plastered on his face, but his heart beats harder, faster, deeper; his whole being feels as if it could explode and engulf the whole galaxy.

Judith stops near a partly repaired Lincoln Navigator luxury van from the turn of the century. He turns abruptly toward her.

The girl with the long hair as dark as night and the eyes as blue as cobalt stars fixes him with all the intensity of her gaze.

“You don't know how to tell the truth, but you don't know how to lie, either. Why did Yuri McCoy come to see you last night?”

Fine, says Gabriel to himself, the young man with the guitar, the young man with the power to heal machines, the young man about to fight a war against the whole world. Fine, just as well to risk everything here under the moon, in this magical moment when the girl's beauty seems more important than any event taking place in the universe.

Yes, just as well to risk everything, because we have nothing more to lose, except all that we are.

“A second mutation is happening. In Junkville.”

“A second mutation? You mean, like the one in '63?”

“Sort of. But this one is worse. Much worse.”

“Worse, how?”

“It’s bad, like the end of mankind starting all over again. Bad, like the end of all thinking life on Earth.”

Judith Sevigny stares deeply into his eyes; her gaze is like a concentrated ray of pure blueness, a beam of cold fire that penetrates right to the spot where his entire being vibrates to the mad cadence of his own pounding heartbeat.

3 > WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME

Yuri McCoy consults a small, portable microcomputer from the 2010s, a machine decontaminated by the Healing Hand of the young man with the guitar, Gabriel Link de Nova.

Yuri is one of the few people privileged enough to be able to enter into contact with Link de Nova, to know his identity. Even to know of his existence.

When the rumor reached the people still living within the city of Grand Junction two winters ago, then Omega Blocks a few months later and thus, almost immediately, Junkville itself, Sheriff Langlois and the HMTV city council put some strict rules in place. They now patrolled, armed, around the periphery of their sanctuary. Only three people were authorized to serve as contacts between Link de Nova and the territory's residents. The rumors grew. People said everything and anything, then the complete opposite. Sheriff Langlois saw an unparalleled opportunity to cover his tracks. He spread, or caused to be spread, various false rumors of his own. In the end, most everyone had accepted the idea that, in fact, the man who could heal machines did not live in Heavy Metal Valley.

Yuri is one of the three official contacts. He is in charge of the southern area of the Territory: Junkville, mainly. The second contact, one Chrysler Campbell, handles Omega Blocks, which he shares with Yuri, and several sectors located to the north, like the new boomtown of Dead-link, which sprang up under the abandoned interchange in the space of two or three years. The last contact, a woman, a former cosmodrome navigation systems engineer, still lives in Grand Junction itself, in what remains of Monolith Hills.

Yuri and Chrysler see each other periodically to decide how to proceed with Omega Blocks, but they have met the woman from Monolith Hills

only once or twice. They are far from forming a cohesive group, a true association, a gang, much less any sort of mafia. They are a microconglomerate of freelancers, that's all. Small private entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs who sell survival to the highest bidder.

The new process of linguistic devolution Yuri was able to diagnose thanks to Chrysler Campbell's presence of mind, this anthropogenic mutation that attacks human language without introducing any viral agent into the brain cells, this new "disease" born of the breakdown of the Control Metastructure, undoubtedly represents an unprecedented opportunity.

For almost two years now, his activities as a middleman linking the young man who heals machines and the people whose biocontained components are failing have basically allowed him to survive, given his commissions in merchandise and cash during the exchange, merchandise that he can then sell at an extremely high price on one of the region's multiple black markets.

The only problem is that Link knows how to heal machines. There is nothing to indicate he might be able to perform the same action for a living organism.

During the night following his visit to Heavy Metal Valley, Yuri couldn't sleep a wink. He had only dozed off at the first pale gleam of the winter dawn.

What is really brewing with this *new terminal breakdown* of the Metastructure, this inexplicable paradox? Even though it is dead, even though the NeuroNet MegaNetwork hasn't existed for twelve years, and even though Grand Junction, by the grace of the miraculous powers possessed by the young man with the guitar, is one of the rare places on the planet where an electronic machine still has a chance of functioning normally?

What new source of capital is immortal death going to bring him this time?

He identifies the noise as soon as he hears it behind him, on the other side of the bed he has just stretched out upon, his eyes heavy with sleep.

The telephone. More precisely, the radio-telephone. A khaki-green thingamajig with a black circular Bakelite dial for the composition of

numbers and a toothed wheel for selecting frequencies.

A military antique a century old—from the Vietnam War, or so the wealthy old so-and-so seeking the quick repair of his anticancer implant said. He has collected three of them.

Yuri kept one, gave the second to Gabriel, and the third to Chrysler. This way they were able to communicate with a speed half the humans in Grand Junction or anywhere else had not known in a long time, and could hardly even imagine now.

With machines a century old.

It's almost funny.

He picks up the receiver.

It's Chrysler, calling on one of the contraption's preselected military frequencies.

When Chrysler calls, it always means a new prospect. It means business. It means immediate action.

"Chrysler?"

"The very same," replies a voice that seems metal-coated and choppy with white noise. "Who else?"

"I saw Link de Nova last night. I talked to him about our business."

"Oh, yeah? He's going to have to work another miracle, and fast."

"I know. It's probably impossible, but he's the only one with any chance at all."

There are one or two seconds of silence, so long that ten thousand heartbeats wouldn't fill them.

"What?" Yuri asks simply, after the ten thousand heartbeats have been dropped into the white noise of infinity.

"It's getting worse. It got worse just today. The guy from District 17 is in the numeric phase. And the one from Junkville, up there on Midnight Oil, died this morning. My local contact told me. The necro trio from Big Bag Recyclo already picked up the body."

Not a surprise, thinks Yuri. No confusion there. The next logical step. Foreseen, scheduled, planned. "This is only the beginning, Chrysler. We still have a little time; we can try to—"

"Our time is running out, Yuri. Believe me." The voice crackles across the ghostly radio like a solar flare, full of threatening intensity.

"What makes you say that?"

Two more seconds, ten thousand more heartbeats. This time, Chrysler breaks the silence: “I’ve had six more cases in Omega Blocks since yesterday. And my contact on Midnight Oil says there were two others in Junkville today. There must be more; you’d better check.”

Immediate action indeed, Yuri says to himself.

The *thing*, the metavirus, isn’t wasting any time.

No more than it did six years earlier, when it destroyed what remained of the still-operational programmable machines on Earth, after the death of the Metastructure six years before *that* had annihilated more than three quarters of them.

They must collect data—store files—gather information—as fast as possible.

The survival of every “man” crammed into Omega Blocks and the artificial hills of Junkville is a variant on that of the electronic systems; it matters little to him, in and of itself. His sole interest lies in the possibilities for experimentation it provides, permitting them to continue their systematic analysis of the phenomenon. His sole interest lies in the fact that it can allow him to know more about the “thing,” and help him gain the necessary time for the young man from HMV to find a demonstration. His sole interest lies in what it lets them imagine, him and Chrysler Campbell—the opportunity to expand their business.

Yuri, like Chrysler Campbell, was immunized at the time of his first meeting with Gabriel Link de Nova.

That was how they came into contact with him. Chrysler knew one of Sheriff Langlois’ assistants, a Frenchman, and he had managed to pinpoint the precise epicenter of the rumor. At the time, Chrysler had been suffering from the degeneration of his main antiviral neuro-implant, and he was in a great deal of danger. As for Yuri, he had been facing a multitude of problems related to the breakdown of the software in the nanocomponents that regulated his motor functions. The two men had known each other since childhood, when they lived in the thirteenth district of Omega Blocks; their parents had known one another well, trafficking in technology of all types even before the Metastructure disappeared.

Gabriel Link de Nova had healed them, and as with everything that benefited from the young man’s therapeutic acts, it was for good. Not only

were their infected artificial organs immune to what they called the “virus” from that point onward, the virus was rendered harmless to all their other natural and manmade parts—the difference had long ceased to matter for the inhabitants of UniWorld—as well. No biointegrated implant, no group of amplified cells, no transgenic center, no proteinic program, no bodily nanocomputer could ever be affected. Ever.

They were *immunized*.

It was a virtually priceless acquisition, and the two men realized right away that they had gained a huge advantage from the situation. Not only could they sell the healing of a particular bionic system but, even better, they could sell life itself; they could sell insurance to the men of Grand Junction, insurance as good as gold, real insurance that the metavirus could never attack them again, or any of their implants, or any of the parts they might wish in future to transplant.

Chrysler had managed to arrange a meeting with Sheriff Langlois, and made him understand that it was better to manage the chaos than to implement a sort of ostrich policy. The rumor was all over the Territory; they could of course continue trying to quash it, but that would only make things worse. The best thing to do was to gather a small group of trustworthy men, specialists in medicine and operative bionics who would be capable of making selections from among the requests flowing in from everywhere.

Yuri still believes it was on that day that HMMV’s sheriff had had the idea of spreading his own rumors as a smoke screen.

It was on that day, in any case, that Langlois had said, between clenched teeth: “And I imagine that the ‘trustworthy men’ you have in mind to carry out this mission are yourselves?”

Yuri can still remember Campbell’s face, his smile, at that moment. An irresistible smile.

“I have a degree from MIT in nanorobotics, one of the last ones awarded, and this young man here has a certain talent for neurobiology. We have been immunized by Gabriel Link de Nova himself. By the time you find someone better, if such a person exists, it will probably be too late, Sheriff.”

And Yuri had known Chrysler Campbell was right. It was obvious that the sheriff knew it, too.

“You’ve got my okay,” was all he had said.

And now, welcome to Junkville.

En route to the hill of Midnight Oil. A township specializing in the recycling of oil of all kinds, particularly engine drainage.

Welcome to Junkville.

Around seventy square kilometers of artificial hills made of clinkers or putrefied hodgepodes of garbage. The luckiest people live here, atop piles of trash, where there is still a chance to get hold of some object, something mechanical still in working order.

The city sprang up at the same time as the cosmodrome and the adjacent city of Grand Junction were built, about forty-five kilometers to the north of the metropolis. It rose on the outskirts of an abandoned mining site that was already being used as an industrial dump, and for decades it received all the human waste of the city cosmodrome, all the losers, the errant souls, anyone who had not managed to obtain his or her passage to the stars, the so-desired ticket to the Orbital Ring.

When the cosmodrome ceased its activities for good, though the metavirus was exterminating almost half a billion human beings each year, groups of refugees from the United States and Canada trekked for months across the territory, long lines of half-dead people wandering without destination or hope.

The survivors had ended by remaining where they were, eking out encampments on whatever somewhat-hospitable patches of ground they could find.

Many Canadian refugees had come to live in Deadlink this way, halfway between Junkville and the cosmodrome. Convoys from the American Midwest had taken possession of part of Omega Blocks and its environs, and had enlarged the perimeter of Junkville with their own colonies of particleboard houses. A new economic demographic was born, the fruit of incessant migration, that rendered any notion of borders, even continental ones, literally absurd. The provenance of those that died or left became an unsolvable puzzle; the identities and destinies of those that arrived in Mohawk Territory to replace them more or less temporarily were equally shrouded in mystery.

Junkville was truly created in the image of this world where nothing now had its own space, where no one had any true roots or the possibility of exploring and discovering new territories.

The Earth was strangely sealed off, closed at both ends, marked by the universal presence of man, and yet at the same time oddly open, as if it had been disemboweled, spread open like a whore's legs, and utterly lacking in any shelter for the dying masses of humanity.

It made no sense—not that anything ever really had.

It makes no sense, and yet it is all the world has left.

* * *

The main problem that Yuri is rapidly sensing concerns the systemic differences between the two mutations.

When the Metastructure contaminated itself so bizarrely in 2057, via some still-unknown process, it destroyed almost 90 percent of computer networks and more than half of bionic systems. The vast majority of machines and their electronic interfaces were directly connected to the MegaNetwork. Bionic systems, with the exception of NeuroNet modules, were usually autonomous, but certain components connected on occasion to the Metamachine. In short, after the annihilation of the Metastructure, the quasi-totality of machines and a good half of bionic systems began to self-destruct, causing the deaths of more than a third of what was then called Human UniWorld, the planetary park the Metastructure had controlled for decades.

But it appears that all that destruction and death wasn't enough. A few groups of unconnected neurocomputers had survived; some biosystems had remained intact, as well as pirate devices and numerous lots of new machines, newly rolled off the robotized factory conveyer belts just before these broke down.

For a few years, it seemed that humanity had earned a bit of a reprieve. At the cosmodrome, activities had timidly resumed, a few rockets taking off each year from launchpad number one.

Then, though the Metastructure was dead, and though the NeuroNet MegaNetwork had collapsed six years before, a "thing" had begun attacking the last surviving machines, the ones whose bionic systems had escaped the first wave of destruction.

Now six more years had elapsed—and the postmechanical entity was striking again.

But something has changed.

Something important.

This “second mutation” isn’t attacking machines or organisms, but language. It is attacking the very substance of being.

There is still work to do. A lot of work.

For the “thing.”

And for them.

Midnight Oil is south of Junkville, a scrap-metal butte populated by a ghetto of around two thousand people. It is one of the last hills fronting the encampments of particleboard houses improvised by the refugees from the American Midwest, still farther south.

Yuri will have to cross the entire city, as usual, to find Pluto Saint-Clair, Chrysler Campbell’s local contact and one of the best sources of information they have.

He stands before the scavenged mirror hanging across from his bed, beside the small hatchway leading to his bathroom cubicle. The room’s exit door is at his back; he can see its metallic armature and dull-gray surface just behind his reflection.

Yuri does not live in a particleboard house or one cobbled together from various scraps, like nine-tenths of the population of Junkville, but in what is known as a Combi-Cube, a mobile cabin with a photovoltaic sensor on the roof. It consists of one room containing a hospital bed, a small workspace with a few tools, his video reader, a television screen connected to the reader, and a crate filled with memory cards, disks in various formats, and a half dozen boxes filled with at least a hundred kilograms of scientific literature. To this room is attached a multifunction bathroom cubicle and a service module, all meant for a single tenant. Thanks to business, to Chrysler and his connections, and also to his daily work—an unrelenting process of gorging himself on tons of books and videodiscs about medicine, biology, and neurosurgery—he has grown up faster than any member of his generation. He has grown up even faster than Gabriel Link de Nova, about whom one wonders if he will ever grow up, if he will ever be more than a child.

He is barely twenty-two years old, but he already possesses the experience of a man twice his age. Chrysler Campbell, who isn’t the type to be careful of anyone’s feelings, nor to be overly polite to anyone, even

complimented him one evening as they were returning from HMTV, where they had concluded an important deal with Gabriel.

“You know, I’m almost ten years older than you—but I almost feel like it’s the other way around. You think incredibly fast. Your analytical faculties are amazing, and it’s as if you possess by intuition what takes most people years of experience in the field. You act like a predator instinctively. I saw it even when you were a kid in Omega 13.”

Chrysler had let a few seconds pass, then sighed: “I hope you’ll never have to kill anyone. They wouldn’t have a chance.”

He remembers what he said to Chrysler Campbell that night, as he drove them in the Ford F-350 pickup toward the southern part of the Territory. “If that does happen, I’m counting on not giving them a chance.”

Chrysler had smiled, shaking his head. He had turned to look out the truck window at Monolith Hills in the distance. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

The moon is at its zenith, round and slightly reddish. It slants rays of starry silver across the vast desert plains, the bare rocks, the scrubby brush barely surviving around the few isolated shrubs and the dead trees fossilizing in the sand.

It is almost unbelievably beautiful, Yuri thinks to himself. The world is still beautiful. It’s dying, but it is still beautiful. The desert is taking over. Men are disappearing. Civilization is being snuffed out. But it is still beautiful.

It is all utterly incomprehensible.

In Junkville, the streets are ramps of packed dirt or gravel covered with pounded scrap metal and errant drifts of sand caught in contrary winds from the Canadian heat shield or what remains of the Great Lakes, now giant Midwestern deserts.

The roads wind among the artificial hills covered with collapsible houses, makeshift shelters of various types, and sometimes the characteristic silhouettes of mobile homes—a true bit of luxury—or the more common, capsule-shaped Combi-Cubes.

Like any city, any *urba*, Junkville has formed according to the force and hierarchy of the powers that be.

To the north, on the border with Omega Blocks, or to the east, toward Vermont, is where the people who have managed to rise slightly above the general squalor live. For example there is Little Congo, five hills grouped

together where Junkville's aristocracy dwells, those cosmopolitan procurers who sell, to the even richer denizens of the old Monolith Hills strip, all the new flesh that ends up here in search of refuge.

Young women and men come to Junkville strung out, ready to do anything for a chance to get near the cosmodrome again, to touch a fingertip to the fire of their dreams. They are ready for anything. Absolutely anything. Their sex, their age, their physical condition—those things don't matter much at all.

They were ready for anything before the Fall.

And now they will be ready for even worse, if they survive.

* * *

Yuri takes the gasoline-powered Kawasaki from its parking compartment adjoining the service module and pulls it carefully away from his Combi-Cube.

He drives east toward the quarter of the old kings, and then turns full south. Road 34, running evenly north-south, takes him—floating a few centimeters above the ground—across a long expanse of stone and silicon. The sun is already high in a steel-gray sky streaked with gold light.

Pluto Saint-Clair's house is on the northern face of the butte. The interior streets of the hill villages are often unnamed, even unnumbered—you have to have a precise description of the place where you want to go and, if possible, a plan of the city or, even better, the hill in question to have a chance of finding your way in this labyrinth of collapsible Recyclo carton houses, these makeshift shelters built of abandoned mining facilities or scrap metal, these ruins of who knows what.

Pluto Saint-Clair's house is recognizable among all the others on Midnight Oil; it is the only Combi-Cube on the hill and one of the last models made by Honda, much more spacious than the old Chinese model Yuri lives in. In addition to the standard photovoltaic sensor, it has its own working windmill.

Pluto Saint-Clair is one of those people seriously beginning to climb the rungs of Junkville's hierarchical ladder. He stays here at the southern extremity of the city more out of habit than any feeling of belonging, apparently. No one ever gets too attached to anything in Junkville. The city is constantly in a state of transition; overall mobility is a condition of

survival, even for the rich. Little Congo will probably be gone in a year or two, other hills becoming home to the current residents and their former home resettled by another branch of activity in the city where everything, always, is recycled.

If Pluto Saint-Clair has been able to obtain such a Combi-Cube, there are certainly reasons for it.

He is also a longtime resident of the area. He is even older than Chrysler; he knows everything that happens, every plan, and he knows them before anyone else. He is their best source of information, and that doesn't come free.

He, of course, traffics, too.

Not that he knows anything about the secret of the young man with the guitar. He just collects his money—and not a small amount of it—as compensation. But he is the one that tells them where, how, and who to look for, who possesses what, what condition it is in, and who might interest their mysterious “client.” He is the one who tells them about specific breakdowns people suffer, clients of his they might be able to help. He is often the one that enables them to put the two “clients” in contact, he who acts as the “invisible hand” linking the supply and demand. He likes to think of himself that way. The Invisible Hand.

He is a man who loves secrets. Not because of paranoia or fear but because of taste. The taste for what is reserved only for a few; the taste for a trap, constantly redeveloped to keep anyone from discovering it. The taste for the risk inherent in every lie, any defense of the truth. Yuri is beginning to know him very well. He shares so many things with this man, and he knows there are so many things this man can teach him.

He traffics, too, like half the population of Junkville—at least.

But unlike Chrysler Campbell and Yuri, he does not deal in technology. To be more specific, the technology he deals in was not considered as such before the fall of the Metastructure; it had already almost disappeared at the time of the Cataclysm.

But now that all the machines are dead or dying, what was not considered technology before is appearing suddenly under the implacable projector of history, in all its terrifying nudity, its magnificent armor.

Not only is it technology, it is the source of all possible Technology, and one might even say that it was the very first technology invented by man.

Pluto Saint-Clair deals in books.

He traffics in literature.

4 > *ACHTUNG BABY*

The stomach contracts violently, like a muscle subjected to an electric discharge, a spasmodic cramp followed by the ejection from the esophagus of gastric juices and bits of food half devoured by body acids. It drips with the slowness of a dribble of spittle; it explodes out of him in jets inside the retractable bathrooms, and outside of them.

He cannot prevent the attack. He cannot do anything. There is nothing to be done. He has been vomiting for fifteen minutes already, in an average cycle of ten to fifteen minutes for every hour or two, and it has been going like that for more than a week.

And it is getting worse; every day, every hour. Every time the constrictions are more explosive, more painful, more infernal.

He knows very well that if nothing is done he will die. And worse still, he knows equally well that nothing can be done.

His Sony-Motorola implant is failing. His central nanogenerator.

It is a marvel of transgenic technology. And if it breaks down, the retroviral nervous-degenerative illness will rapidly recur at full strength. This is a disease that doesn't waste any time. He would only have had a brief reprieve anyway, perhaps a few years.

The implant functioned for five years. It's almost a miracle.

But now it's over. He has been infected in his turn, just like all those billions of other human beings who thought they were safe and then died during the past six years.

He has often prayed to some cybernetic god to protect his new implant from falling prey to the mutant strain of the virus. This outbreak seems slower than the original one, the one in '57. There are still some people with bionic implants around who survived after the death of the Metastructure.

Maybe a little slower. But just as merciless. And now, voilà—it's his turn. His day. The first of his last days.

Thirty-nine years old. Not even forty. And probably less than a week to live.

After the attack of vomiting comes a terrible migraine, as usual, clamping his skull in its burning grip. A ton of aspirin wouldn't be enough; it's useless to hope for anything from classic analgesics, or from anything that can still be found in Junkville. The head pain indicates the beginning of the recurrence of his degenerative disease; the Sony-Motorola implant will probably be good for only three or four more days. And he will probably live only three or four more days after that.

Lying on his small Japanese futon, he watches his legs and hands shake convulsively, unable to control their frenetic movement. He feels his facial muscles begin to contract in jerks, and he knows—he watched it in the bathroom mirror once—his eyes are rolling back periodically in their sockets, causing him to lose his vision for an instant.

And all this is only the beginning. The symptoms are only going to get worse, gaining amplitude and intensity, and soon other dysfunctions will appear.

Finally—and it will doubtless come as a relief—he will die. All this effort absurdly thwarted, all this life reduced to nothing, all this strength of will erased from human memory.

For two or three years during the time of the Metastructure, more than a decade ago now, James Vegas Orlando was one of the young prodigies of the township of Little Congo. He had been quickly noticed for his sense of business organization and had advised the committee that renovated the Flesh Market district in order to make it a true showroom for the local whores. He had established solid rules with the pimps of Monolith Hills. He was full of ideas, careful to never step in anyone's flower bed as he ran his business like an old pro. Even better, thanks to him, the pimps of Little Congo had seen their collective prosperity multiply by two or three times in the space of twenty months. It was some sort of record.

His trajectory within the elite of Junkville's aristocracy had been like one of the cosmodrome's rockets. He had quickly become rich, really rich, and was serenely envisaging a home in the city of Grand Junction itself—Monolith Hills, most likely, or even one of the trendy quarters: Novapolis, or Von Braun Heights?

Then the dream had been shattered, along with the rest of the world.

The attack passed shortly after noon.

He is able to think again. He tries to place his thoughts in some sort of order, so they might at least delay the end.

Of course, there is the rumor. It has been swirling throughout the whole Territory for two years now. It's the biggest rumor around. It's THE rumor. But it's only a rumor, undoubtedly one of those urban legends that appear whenever two or three houses agglomerate anywhere.

People say all kinds of things. They talk about a child gifted with paranormal powers, and sometimes about an old man, and sometimes even a young woman. They talk about some sort of secret army formed just before the fall of the Metastructure. They talk about an experimental laboratory that has a universal bionic antivirus. They talk about voodoo and magic orchestrated by mediums. They talk about an antimachine created by the Metastructure itself, before or after its death. They talk about an extraterrestrial artifact. They even talk about angels. They have seen it everywhere, in Heavy Metal Valley to begin with, but also in the rest of the territory. They talk of its presence, whatever that means, in Deadlink, Grand Junction, Monolith Hills, Omega Blocks, Junkville, of course, and also the deserted city of the old body tuners of Neon Park, or in some isolated township—Aircrash Circle, or X-15, or Surveyor Plateau, or Grand Funk Railroad ...

It is just a rumor, but it might be his only chance. The rumor has crystallized during the past few months. There are more and more functioning electric machines in the Independent Territory. It is especially obvious that a surprising number of people whose vital systems were infected are being miraculously healed. And it isn't a temporary remission, either. People are being immunized forever. The people themselves never talk about it. They all talk about some "inexplicable miracle" and other bullshit like that. In the best-case scenario they might slide you some tiny tidbit of information that gives credit to one or another variant of the rumor.

It has truly attained the status of a legend; soon people will be talking about millions of healings, even though half of the current population of the globe will have died.

Maybe there is another way.

There is his connection with that girl, that Irish-Haitian ex-whore he had had working on Monolith twelve or thirteen years ago, in Flesh Market. Ariane Gallagher. One of his former neighbors in Little Congo, now living in Clockwork Orange County a little to the north. She heard him talking about a guy who knew someone, a person who just arrived in the territory and who, they say, is one of the men who worked on the last version of the Metastructure.

One of his old friends says she knows someone who knows someone. A third-degree connection in the best light. The usual way of things in Junkville. But it might be a beginning, which is much better than nothing. And it is all he has. Where does she live again? Oh yes—in Vortex Townships, above Ultrabox, just before Autostrada. That's northwest of the city. Ariane Gallagher has managed to avoid the downward spiral that generally awaits the old whores of Flesh Market; she could easily have ended up living in a Recyclo particleboard box in Toy Division or on New Arizona, where the refugees from the American Midwest huddle, where life is worth less than sand. She probably found some old guy to hustle, meeting his needs during his final days, and she came out of it pretty well. Vortex Townships isn't so bad. It isn't too far from Little Congo, in fact. Not too far from survival. He might be able to make it there in his old gasoline-powered Buick ...

So this is Vortex Townships, the only area anywhere near as high-tech as Junkville. It consists of a long line of structures built of specialized technological junk, mostly or completely mechanical but from electronic systems, requiring some programming and thus no longer functioning anywhere in the world. These hills were settled at about the same time as the others, but Vortex Townships quickly found its niche, its unique specificity. Before the fall of the Metastructure and the death of the machines, Vortex Townships served as a hub for almost all the techno trafficking in the southern part of the Independent Territory.

There's nothing better to be found there now than old, just barely functioning televisions and radios, cassette players from the twentieth century, gear-driven watches, hydraulic pumps, gasoline engines, bottles of propane gas, plumbing fixtures, and toothed keys.

The only traffic happening there now, really, is that of the necro Triads, who recover all the bodies found in public areas and even private homes in order to harvest their natural, possibly profitable, organs. The Triads of Vortex Townships are the best organized in the entire territory; they compete easily with the small organizations of Big Bag Recyclo or Snake Zone.

Here, the human body is still used for something. Here nothing is lost, only transformed. Even death. Especially death.

Here, everything has some use. Everything is recycled.

Ariane Gallagher looks exactly like what she is—an old prostitute. She looks like what this city has become, like what the entire territory of Grand Junction has become.

Like what the world has become.

There is no need for preliminary small talk with a whore. Not even for conversation. And he doesn't have one second to lose.

But on the other hand, he knows she is like him—business before anything—and that she would not believe he had come halfway across the city to exchange reminiscences about Flesh Market. He can attack directly. He can say everything he has come to say. He can reveal his secret.

“One of my old implants just broke down. I have a contact—I won't tell you his name—who told me you might be able to help me. That you know someone.”

The old hooker permits herself the luxury of two or three seconds of suspense. “Yes. I know someone. A landlord. He owns a capsule building on BlackSky Ridge.”

“Okay, great. He's the one?”

“No. I won't tell you his name, either. My friend knows another guy very well, somewhere else in the city. I won't tell you his name, either.”

Three degrees, including his contact in Clockwork Orange. Three degrees of separation, thinks James Vegas Orlando. Where is the man I'm looking for?

“The man told my friend more than once that he was waiting for someone. Someone important. He kept using those words. This stranger arrived around two days ago, my friend told me. He's the man you need to

see. He might be able to heal you, and maybe others. At least that's what the man thinks who knows my friend at BlackSky Ridge."

Ah, okay, thinks James Vegas. So it's *four* degrees of separation.

"Great," he says. "BlackSky Ridge, you said? A capsule building?"

"Yes, on the site of an old motel in Monolith Hills. You can't miss it—it has a sign with the UManHome logo. They're orange."

"I'll find it," he says. "The usual price?"

"The usual price. I don't like to change my habits."

5 > *OUTLANDOS D'AMOUR*

The light falls in heavy rays on the face of Wilbur Langlois, illuminating the angular bones of his face in a play of halogen gold and dusty shadow. His black eyes shine like coals lit up by subterranean tungsten; the light makes him even more nocturnal, it brings something out of his being, the millennia of savagery buried in his genetic memory and a bare half-century of civilization—and then a few years of decivilization. It exposes the darkness he is made of, and makes it darker still.

The light streaming in from outside the dark-blue-tinted anti-UV Plexiglas, the solar dimness accentuating the hard planes of his face carved by the artificial light, gives him the look of a robot ready for his turn in a game of chess.

Here in Heavy Metal Valley, he knows he is protecting a sort of sanctuary. It certainly wasn't his job originally; more than twenty years earlier, the Municipal Metropolitan Consortium of the Territory of Grand Junction, the owner of the cosmodrome, offered him the position of sheriff in this zone that was then in full expansion, built barely a dozen kilometers to the northwest of the launchpad, around a community of "greasers," those irrepressible amateur lovers of gasoline-powered vehicles whose presence was just barely tolerated by the UHU. He brought order, justice, and law to them. He brought power and its counterpart, freedom. Of all the residents of the Territory, those who lived in HMTV had suffered the least from the attacks of the Metastructure as it broke down.

He had eventually told himself at the time that it was probably due to the Christian communities whose presence he accepted, putting himself outside the law with regard to Grand Junction's Mohawk authorities and the faceless police of Human UniWorld. He had turned from a Protector of Social Law into a Resistor of World Order, and yet at the time, it had been like a revelation; he had continued his job as sheriff, even amplifying it somewhat; he had remained the armed hand of Justice while welcoming

these refugees from the Invisible onto his soil. When, after the end of the Metamachine-World, the wars and guerrilla fighting of all types had broken out again everywhere on the planet in a final struggle for the honor of History, he had organized the city's defense against the renegades coming from various holdover Islamic emirates, from Ontario, from Illinois, and from certain parts of Quebec. He had become head of the City Council; then, one fine day, he had decided to have himself baptized by Father Newman.

He is now a sheriff in the Post-World, harder than flint, with the inflexibility of a soldier of lost civilizations.

Shortly after his baptism, Milan Djordjevic and his companion—the android former prostitute who had discovered the baby under the Dead-link interchange—the two adoptive parents of little Gabriel Link de Nova, had come to see him, and they had brought the little boy with them.

And they had explained to him what was really happening.

Wilbur Langlois had held to HMV's democratic procedure. The City Council had met; its members were brought up to date, and the most absolute secrecy decreed concerning Gabriel's powers. Wilbur Langlois had done everything he could during the years since then to ensure that the secret remained as well protected as if it were sealed in a strongbox welded shut with an oxyhydric torch.

But the World is full of holes now. Nothing can keep the truth from coming out, like lava erupting from a volcano. Nothing can change the fact that the only materiality in this world now comes from lying and its confrere, betrayal.

For Wilbur Langlois, it means a single imperative: *immediate reinforcement of security procedures.*

Wilbur Langlois. A Mohawk. A mixed-blood, in fact, originally from southern Quebec. A barely human block of stone. A man who is usually laconic, and who at first seems slow and awkward, but who, they say, can hit an old one-dollar coin with a .223-caliber bullet from more than fifty meters away. And that he can do the same thing to a human skull at the same distance, without a twinge of guilt.

Link is facing him. He is nervous.

Wilbur Langlois looks at him without kindness. He stands straight, but without any sign of tension. With him, it is calmness that indicates anger;

quietude points the compass needle toward the “danger” pole. It is ice that signals the presence of flame.

Here, he is the Guardian. The Man of the Law.

What remains of it.

And he is utterly pitiless.

“We made a deal. It’s called a contract.”

Link doesn’t reply. He shrinks in on himself slightly, barely looking at the sheriff in his midnight blue uniform, his silvery badges, his Canadian Mounted Police–style gray hat. And his steely black eyes, harder than bullets about to be fired.

“Everything has to go by me, at least everything important. And even what’s unimportant,” Langlois continues.

Link huddles in on himself even more tightly. The whole City Council is there. And even Judith.

“And it seems to me that this information is of the very highest importance.”

Link de Nova does not speak. He looks in turn at each of the members of the Council, sitting here in their excuse for a city hall, this old Quebecois school bus found one day, full of dead children, south of the river.

“And so someone has betrayed my trust, and, even worse, taken unwise risks.”

The voice holds the almost indifferent calm of an assassin ready to deliver the deathblow.

“So you can easily imagine that I am not happy at all.”

Link watches the members of the Council.

They don’t look very happy, either.

“I wanted to talk to you about it as soon as possible. Right now we’re only dealing with rumors.”

“I’m sick of this, Gabriel. We agreed that I would be kept updated about each visit, especially the important ones. Your friend hasn’t been to see me.”

“We don’t know yet what this is really about, Sheriff Langlois, or even what to do, or how; I assure you, that’s why I talked to Judith about it.”

“Yeah,” grumbles the sheriff, “that’s the best thing you’ve done, because she told her parents right away. And her parents, as you know, are Council members.”

Again, Link looks out of the corner of his eye at each of the men and women sitting around the table in the center of the remodeled school bus and taking up almost its entire length.

He recognizes Judith's parents, sitting on either side of the young woman, and their friends the Sommervilles, an evangelical pastor and his wife. Father Newman is there, too, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick, the deacon. And there is Lady van Harpel, his mother's best friend, who moved to Deadlink two years ago when masses of refugees overtook the small valley where she had been parking her mobile home.

And then there is the sheriff. The block of granite. The Man of Classical Law. He is accompanied by his first adjunct, a solid fellow from Alberta called Slade Orange Vernier.

And to top it all off, at the other end of the table, facing the sheriff, who is presiding over the assembly, is Link's own father, Milan Djordjevic.

His father, who is looking at him with his clear eyes, two opalescent pearls that fix him with an indecipherable mixture of compassion and hardness.

His father, who is not very happy, either, but who knows that Link is doing what he can, with his scanty childish resources, to survive on his own.

His father, who knows he is afraid. Of his own powers as much as of what they must fight.

His father, who knows he is exactly right to be afraid.

"Are these isolated cases, or are we looking at an epidemic in progress? Or the threat of one?"

"Like I told you, Sheriff, we don't know anything yet. My friend told me about two cases that both happened last week. If it started in October there have definitely been others. But how many, is the big question."

"A question we need to answer as soon as possible."

"My friends are looking, Sheriff. You know as well as I do that what they look for, they find."

Langlois' black gaze plunges into Link's own. The fact that he is only twelve years old means nothing, Link knows. In Heavy Metal Valley, you stop being a child after the first twenty-four hours of your life.

“It would be in your interest to keep me informed and to respect procedures, Gabriel.”

A heavy silence falls like a leaden sky over the school bus and the Council table. Langlois’ last remark is one that needs no additional commentary.

Then the sheriff inclines his head in Milan Djordjevic’s direction, at the other end of the table.

“And now we will move on to the second subject that involves us. Or rather ... that involves Mr. Djordjevic.”

Link watches his father with unfeigned curiosity. The man’s face is imperturbable; a very slight smile plays at the corners of his mouth.

“The confirmation is valid, Sheriff,” Milan Djordjevic says. “The Vatican’s holographic seal has been identified.”

Sheriff Langlois says nothing. Clearly, the ball is in Link’s father’s camp.

“The convoy leaves in a few days. According to the weather, it will take three weeks—maybe four—to cross the western Mediterranean, then the Atlantic, and come ashore in Halifax. I think, given the ongoing troubles on the Maine-Canada border with leftover bands of Islamists, that they will have to wind across New Brunswick and the cantons of eastern Quebec, and then the old Mohawk reservations, to reach Grand Junction. But there are still a Catholic community and naval infrastructures in Halifax to receive them, which is what motivated this choice.”

The sheriff asks a silent question that resonates like an alarm siren in the long steel cage of the school bus.

“It will probably take a week to ten days for them to get here from Nova Scotia.”

The silence washes over them like a frigid Arctic wind. There is still a question hanging in the air.

“Two men will accompany the merchandise. They will be authorized by the Order, by grant of a papal bull.”

The silence stretches on, neutral and cold. There is one more question. The final one.

“There will be around twelve thousand books in all.”

6 > *ABSOLUTELY LIVE*

Pluto Saint-Clair's Combi-Cube is halfway up the butte, facing slightly west. It has been repainted with a layer of yellow acrylic lacquer, very bright, like a lemon. It is a startling block of color against the mineral darkness of the hill.

Vague pathways partly covered with scrap metal cover the hillside in every sense, drawing a network of anthracite dust around the collapsible houses and shelters of every type grouped on the slopes.

The butte is marked by etchings and carbon waste, like at least half of the hill villages in Junkville. The slag heaps of the mining complex have been occupied since their creation, and the refining facility adjoining them completely pillaged during the first years of the town's foundation. Nothing is left of it now but the jagged bases of a few rusty pillars, just barely visible above the rocky sand.

A public dump has in the meantime transformed the main shaft into a giant garbage pit, and several heaps of rubbish already surrounded the old mine when Junkville appeared in this inhospitable part of the territory. Black-slag heaps and vaguely polychrome mounds form the motley landscape of the city. Since the fall of the Metastructure, carbon has once again become a widely used energy source. The refuse hills have new competition.

He rides the Kawasaki through the maze of trails, trying not to lose sight of the yellow-painted Combi. The splash of citrus color can be seen for kilometers against the dark slope of Midnight Oil, but the incessant winding of the access roads cause it to disappear several times from his field of vision.

The city is always changing.

The last time he came here, a few days earlier, this particular path didn't exist—it was blocked off, and that other one over there didn't really go in this direction; it didn't lead to the summit then, but it does today.

This is Junkville. Nothing is stable; nothing is fixed, not even the topography. Only the hills don't move. It is the single bit of consolation to be found in the desert.

Pluto Saint-Clair opens the door of his Combi after having uncovered the convex surface of its peephole to get a good look at his visitor. In Junkville, an *identified* man isn't necessarily a friend, but at least he isn't an immediate threat, either.

"It's me, Pluto. Chrysler said—"

"I know. Come in."

Pluto is a tall man, thin and gangly, with salt-and-pepper hair. He wears a threadbare ultramarine Diacra suit and a vermilion shirt; tinted memory-wire glasses cover his eyes. One of his eyes is artificial; Yuri spotted it the first time they met, a glaring reminder of the passage of the "virus" years earlier. Pluto Saint-Clair's optic implant had been saved by some remission or ontological limit of the virus, but he had not escaped severe aftereffects. Today, his natural eye sees as well or better than what had been a top-of-the-line bionic visual amplification system.

Pluto was lucky. He should have lost an eye, one that was already replacing a deficient natural organ. Nothing could have been done to stop it.

It is undoubtedly because of this kind of accident, this type of miracle, that the *thing* is attacking again now, and with heretofore unheard-of perversity.

Pluto welcomes him with a thin smile.

The preliminary chitchat is brief, as usual.

Yuri has come on Chrysler's behalf; they need information about the latest cases happening in Junkville.

"This is a new phenomenon," Yuri says. "A mutation like the one in '63."

Pluto Saint-Clair does not respond; he busies himself making tea in a scavenged samovar.

"Chrysler told me you knew of two cases just today, here in Junkville."

"That's right," the man with the weak artificial eye says laconically.

"We need to collect as much information as possible."

"Did you say it's like the first mutation?"

"Yes. For now the phenomenon is mostly under control, but we don't have enough data. I need to go through Junkville."

Pluto Saint-Clair allows a dubious smirk to cross his lips.

“There isn’t much to do, Yuri.”

Yuri detests fatalism of any kind in combat—his distant maternal Russian origins, perhaps. No lost battle is ever really lost; it is just paving the way for the next one. “There’s always something to do. What does this monster want, for humanity to lie down in its path like a dog waiting to die?”

“You do know that people anticipated this mutation of the virus?”

“It isn’t a virus,” snaps Yuri.

“People said that, too, when the Metastructure was first starting to break down, but nobody wanted to believe it.”

Yuri sighs deeply. “What people are you talking about? And what does that have to do with us and our ‘little’ problem?”

“It doesn’t interest you to know that these people anticipated what would happen, and that some of them even predicted, detail for detail, the fall of the Metastructure?”

“Psychics?” asks Yuri, curiosity kindling within him.

Pluto’s laugh resonates dryly, like a flame in the blackness.

“Psychics! You’re priceless, Yuri.”

“Who else, then?”

“It isn’t only the so-called psychics that ‘see.’ There are also intellectuals. Scientists. Philosophers.”

“Philosophers? As far as I know, it was the philosophers who conceived the semantic principles of the Metastructure. Wasn’t it the philosophers who built the construction camps in the last century?”

“I’m talking about the *true* thinkers, Yuri; stop being an idiot. And some of those thinkers foresaw what is happening now. That’s the main reason I told Chrysler that one of you needed to come see me as soon as possible.”

“Can you be less vague, Pluto? I have information to gather. About the second mutation. I don’t have any time to waste.”

“To waste time is to learn nothing. Listen to me closely. I know one of these ‘thinkers’ that foresaw the death and the ‘superdeath’ of the Metastructure. Someone who came all the way across North America from Texas to see me.”

“Oh, a desert-loving tourist, eh? Is he still here?”

“Yuri, this man came more than five thousand kilometers, and a quarter of that on foot, because he has important information to give me, and even more important information to gather here in Grand Junction. He’s a

professor emeritus. A researcher of great renown. He worked in orbit with one of the best Californian genetics laboratories, and at the time he was part of the consulting team for the Metastructure's last update before the collapse."

"Well, bravo to him. At least there's no risk of another 'update' now. Tell me, why should your visit from this 'professor' interest me? Especially with what's happening now?"

"You know, Yuri, I think I know what's happening with your so-called supplier."

"What do you mean, 'so-called'?"

Pluto Saint-Clair gives another brief bark of laughter, dry as an electrical discharge.

"Yuri, I'm not as naïve as you and Chrysler think. I think you've got—I don't know where, or why—access to a biocybernetic interference device capable of locally controlling the effects of the Metastructure's decomposition. Probably a state-of-the-art weapon, undoubtedly secret, from just before the End of the Machines, that you managed to get your hands on who knows how. That's all."

Yuri immediately realizes the advantage this statement gives him: one more rumor to lead indiscreet people farther away from the epicenter of truth, Gabriel Link de Nova. A system. A "machine." An "Antimachine." What an excellent idea.

He acts, subtly, as if caught in a mistake. He feigns a slight hesitation. And he changes the subject—or, rather, he returns to the initial topic of conversation. "How is it that your friend, this famous 'professor' from who knows where, might be able to give us the help we need? Have you signed some sort of contract with him?"

"Don't make me laugh, Yuri. What's happening in Junkville is much more serious than it seems, but you don't seem to understand that. I have information from Omega Blocks; it's happening there, too."

"I know about it."

"Yes, Chrysler told you, of course. But what he knows is only the tip of the iceberg."

"Listen, Pluto—if you're trying to make me cry about the fate of the millions of people on this fucked planet who will soon be contaminated, all you're doing is wasting even more time. We might as well be watching a retrospective of the Kyoto business, got it?"

“I’d never try to get at your heart, Yuri. That would be an impossible mission, at least for now. I’m just trying to tell you that your system, whatever it is, will most likely reach its limit with this second mutation.”

He needs to defend his position carefully now; that is how anyone would react. You fight for your piece of the pie. And you’re ready to bash someone’s head in to keep it, if you have to. Especially if that someone has guessed even part of the truth. “What makes you think that, Pluto?”

This might be interesting. Why is Pluto Saint-Clair so sure; what led him to this conclusion? He’s no idiot, that’s for sure. It takes a lot more than simple barbarism to survive in Junkville. Yes, this might prove a very fruitful source of information. *What makes you think that, Pluto?*

“Listen, Yuri. I’m going to need to see both you and Chrysler as soon as possible. The Professor is a specialist—let’s say a sort of multispecialist. He’s one of the big guns, believe me. He was nominated for the Nobel in ’56, a year before—”

“Okay, Pluto, we’ll come to see the ‘Professor.’ Now, enough jokes. I need information I can use about what’s happening in Junkville.”

“Fine. I have the addresses of the two cases—the first is on the southern face of Midnight Oil; it should be as easy as the last time. The other one is in a west-central area, one of the oldest parts of Junkville. Ultra-box. Know it?”

“A little. It’s just to the north of BlackSky Ridge; I’ve already been there.”

“I’ve had a few hints that make me think there are three or four other cases in the same area. You’d better go look around Autostrada, too, along the old express tracks. There’s been some noise the past few days.”

Yuri struggles to keep the smile on his face. Pluto is at the top of his game, as always. There still isn’t a lot of precision, but the problems have been delineated and he can begin to look somewhere, somewhere within this non-place as changeable as the desert dunes he embraces with the obvious naturalness appropriate to a progressive, unstoppable arrival.

“We don’t know how to diagnose this mutation yet, Pluto. Our *system*”—he tries not to smile—“whatever it is”—he exaggeratedly struggles to keep a straight face—“will need a lot of data. Don’t expect your usual commission. This is all just speculation, okay? Look at it as a research program. *Search*. We’ll move on to ‘destroy’ once we find out where the enemy is.”

The metaphor seems ridiculous in the face of what by its very nature cannot be located.

Pluto Saint-Clair says nothing for long seconds. Then: “I have some Japanese beer I got in Monolith Hills; you want some?”

“Sure. Thanks. Good thing the AC is working—I’ve never seen it so hot in December.”

Pluto takes the beer out of the freezer and puts two open bottles on the small table in his tiny living room.

“I’ve got weed, too; I grow it behind the Combi. A skunk recipe; C-4 for the brain!”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got to go all the way back across the city on my bike. I’ll settle for the Asahi.”

“No problem. Do you mind if I roll myself one?”

“Pluto, this is your house.”

“Thanks. I need to talk to you seriously. The skunk will help; usually it helps with my inhibitions.”

An ephemeral smile flickers on Pluto’s lips as he pulls his smoking paraphernalia out of a drawer in the table. Two or three minutes later, the characteristic odor of marijuana begins to fill the mobile home of the Midnight Oil informant.

And the informant begins to talk.

“You and Chrysler can try to convince me all you want, but I know your system is somewhere in Heavy Metal Valley or nearby. But that hardly means anything now, because the Professor’s arrival changes everything, and I would really like you to hear me out calmly.”

Yuri raises his bottle in assent.

“I know it isn’t a secret from anyone in the territory that HMTV sheltered forbidden Christian communities during the reign of the Metastructure. Everyone also knows they stayed here and grew after that.”

“Right. Everyone knows that.”

“Okay, so what would you think about the fact that people know about it on the other side of the world, even though almost all means of communication have been destroyed?”

“The other side of the world?”

“Yes. Europe. Italy, to be exact.”

“Italy?”

“Yep, Rome. But there’s something even more important.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Pluto? *Rome*?”

“It appears that ... some parts of the city partially resisted the implosion of the Metastructure, maybe not as well as Grand Junction, thanks to your ‘system,’ but they say that a few computer networks are still operational. And that isn’t all. There’s something even more important. Much more important.”

“More important than working computers? What, exactly?”

“That’s where I want you to become involved. You and Chrysler. In the biggest secret.”

“Oh, please; come on—no bad spy films, I’m begging you.”

“The Professor is a very old acquaintance of mine, but he has a true friend in the territory, a sort of colleague. He told me he spent years following him after the fall of the Metastructure, and every time he was too late—the man had already moved away. This was mostly happening in Europe. The final jolts of the Grand Jihad were more violent there than anywhere else.”

“I—”

“Let me finish. I don’t know where exactly this friend of the Professor’s is, but he lives in Grand Junction. The Professor himself told me so; he got here the day before yesterday, and I found him a rental capsule thanks to a buddy—on BlackSky Ridge, actually. So the Professor’s friend will soon be receiving a delivery from Europe, and the Professor has asked me to oversee the security of the merchandise once it arrives in Quebec and then in the Independent Territory. Obviously its presence in Junkville must be kept top secret.”

Obviously, thinks Yuri. What better place than Junkville to keep a secret? “Merchandise?”

“The kind of merchandise I specialize in. Except that this doesn’t have to do with the kinds of instruction manuals and technical documents I usually send your way.”

“Instruction manuals? You’re going to receive a delivery of instruction manuals?”

This is undreamed-of. Half of the small fortune he and Chrysler have amassed over the past two years came from the resale of instruction manuals and technical documentation removed during exchanges between the Healing Hand and the happy possessor of these manuals that permit the giving of new life, even if only for a few hours, to machines. And especially

the relearning of how they function. The memorization of the techniques in the hope of one day, maybe, being able to reproduce it. An instruction manual is often worth much more than the machine about which it was originally written.

“I told you it wasn’t about that, Yuri.”

“What, then? What is it about?”

Pluto seems to be carefully thinking over his response. He inhales a deep lungful of psychotropic smoke and breathes it out in a long gray-green serpent that twines around Yuri, who does nothing to dispel its ectoplasmic presence.

“The best way I can put it is that it is about instruction manuals for instruction manuals.”

The man is around forty-five years old and lives in a collapsible house that is relatively large for its type. According to his neighbors he is one of the American refugees who fled the Midwest and its expanding deserts for Junkville about a year and a half earlier, just before the first huge simoons spread there from Indiana and Ohio and from what had long been the vast Canadian prairie, where the desert steppe had already conquered most of Ontario. He arrived in Junkville just ahead of the desert. He arrived with the sand at his heels.

And the man is standing in front of him now, near the small window set into one of the walls of his collapsible house. He is expressionless, hands hanging listlessly at his sides, eyes bulging and bloodshot with exhaustion, open mouth producing long sequences of sounds.

He is pronouncing sentences that no doubt make sense in his brain, but which reach the outside world as a garbled torrent of syllables.

The phonemes of each phrase are there, but they have been deprived of their linguistic unity and scattered randomly together with other errant phonemes to form words that mean nothing at all.

Sometimes, series of consonants or vowels, repeated identically, are heard in the semantic bric-a-brac, harbingers of the next phase that is now soon to come. Tomorrow, or in two days at the most, the man will recite only alphabetical sequences, like the case Yuri saw with Chrysler in Omega 17. Calmly, Yuri checks the well-ordered contents of his special Medikit, made by Gabriel Link de Nova into a specialized, handheld weapon against

the “thing” born of the Metastructure’s death. Everything is ready for biological sampling. Nothing remains but to obtain the sick man’s consent.

Yuri can see real distress on the man’s face; everything—his eyes, the expression on his face, the extreme tension in his muscles—indicates despair even deeper than what he has seen in other people whose biosystems have broken down.

Yuri does not really feel like he is in a position to do anything at all. How will he talk to this man? A deaf-mute, at least, can communicate with sign language, according to a stable and coherent system.

Since his visit to Omega Blocks, and now while observing this poor fellow in his collapsible house, Yuri has come to understand fully, aghast, that there is really no coherence, no stability, no dynamic in what the men touched by the “second mutation” are suffering.

Not only is the man crushing each word into distinct phonemes to form something that vaguely resembles sentences but no rule—no system in existence—is emerging from this linguistic malfunction.

No law. None.

The brain seems to be functioning in a state of constant improvisation, working in a purely stochastic process.

The sentences are never repeated in the same way, exhausting all possible combinations.

It is astonishingly like a *game*.

The surest way—not the shortest, but the simplest—is to leave Midnight Oil and go west, taking Road 5 straight to the huge slag heaps of Carbon City, and then turn north on Road 8. He will pass BlackSky Ridge, maybe glimpsing the small group of UManHome capsules where Pluto claims his friend is living at the moment.

He needs information, fast, and he is in a city where everything is constantly changing. Especially information.

Maybe this professor from Texas will be useful to him, but while he waits he’d better find the guy in Ultrabox, the one in the numeric phase, take samples, and then investigate Autostrada, where according to Pluto Saint-Clair there are other cases in various degrees of contamination. The Post-Machine is spreading, quietly, like a secret invasion force sent by the world to spy on itself.

Soon it will widen its scope; it will engulf all humanity, which will feel the brunt of its true strength. The World can only wait for it.

Carbon City is composed of a large assembly of slag heaps grouped in concentric half-circles around the old mining complex. It is the largest concentration of carbon on the site and was one of the first encampments to organize itself as a veritable township during the birth of Junkville forty years earlier.

Beyond their carbonic heights, now square in the middle of the desert steppe, stretches the vast concrete-paved quadrilateral of Reservoir Can: sixteen gasoline-and kerosene-storage tanks, immense white tubular structures marked with the seal of Petro-Canada, an old gasoline company from the time when the world still existed.

Reservoir Can belongs to the entire community of Junkville; it is the residents' only collective property, guarded day and night by armed men selected from all the townships.

Continuing along Road 8, he crosses the high black buttes bordering the slums of Big Bag Recyclo to the east; this is one of the city's biggest dumps, its round hills rising across from the slag heaps. Then he sees the rocky spine of BlackSky Ridge. It is one of Junkville's rare natural hills, a mesa around six hundred meters long and three hundred wide, already surrounded by the sands driven there by the southern winds in their relentless quest to infiltrate the city's interior. The communities of Black-Sky Ridge have been able to take advantage of their natural environment; overhanging the city by a hundred meters, the hill is also situated right in the middle of a wind tunnel. Several dozen scavenged windmills whirl there, providing enough electricity for this whole portion of the city. BlackSky Ridge's windmill park is dwarfed, though, in comparison with the vast expanses of Windtalker Alley at the eastern end of the city, which boasts more than a hundred helixes facing the Vermont border.

Junkville's roads are not streets. They mainly accommodate traffic composed of electric cars and gasoline-, battery-, or gas-powered motorcycles, whose speeds do not exceed twenty or thirty kilometers an hour. In addition, when two automobiles or, worse, two small trucks have to pass each other, one of them is usually obliged to pull over to the road's shoulder, whatever its size or state of disrepair.

Yuri sees some orange spots glinting weakly on the gray surface of BlackSky Ridge.

The UManHome capsules Pluto talked about.

BlackSky Ridge. At its summit, the windmills' blades seem to be stirring the starry sands of the Milky Way. Turning west, he can see the high masses of Carbon City and, farther still, beyond the forming desert, the shrouded bluish forms of the high buttes forming the border with Ontario; to the north, in the city of Grand Junction itself, the peaks of Monolith Hills stand like wooded buttresses against them.

From BlackSky Ridge, like from Big Bag Recyclo, the horizon can only be seen as a charcoal gray bar. Yuri muses to himself that twilight must look like a black hole here, and that if the sky were pure monochrome blue, clear of the waxy dust forever blown into it by the wind, it would be even more depressing.

It is as he is heading toward the group of capsules, his eye attracted by the bright orange splotches standing out against the gray-blue mass of the Ridge, that he notices the sparkling Buick LeSabre; it must be sixty years old at least.

It is a bright red luxury car, gasoline-powered; he instantly recognizes the trademark of the local pimp. He turns his motorcycle promptly toward the roadside to avoid this metal monster making not the slightest effort to leave him even a tiny bit of maneuvering room.

As the vehicles brush in a grating of metal against metal, Yuri has time to see the other driver's face.

Typical of Grand Junction. A pimp, obviously; his dress and attitude all but scream it. He seems in a great hurry and even in pain, judging by the convulsive shudder that wracks him as he drives, a tic characteristic of the distinctive troubles caused by the systemic breakdown of an antiviral nanogenerator.

There are still plenty of artificial organs and some bionic implants to be destroyed. Soon this pimp will be dead, thinks Yuri. He's lucky that he won't experience the fate of the "men" affected by the "second mutation."

He is lucky that he will not experience the fate of this man, for example:

"11001101010111000110101101110001000001101010001100001
100011100011000000111110010101010111100011000110010101010
111000010101011000010101011000010101011010110010101100010
10101110101101010101101010101010000101001110101111101."

The man from Ultrabox lives in a collapsible house in a part of the township that has specialized in boxes and containers of all kinds since its origin. He is around thirty years old and in a lamentable state, covered in a thick layer of sulfurous scum. The bed where he lies resembles one a street dog would use; traces of urine mark his pants with large dark spots and drips. The smell of excrement in the small convertible shelter is overpowering. Yuri concludes right away that the automatic-recycling toilet module is not functioning. He can also see immediately that he has absolutely no chance of having any kind of conversation with this fellow. Even less chance than he had with the man he just left on Midnight Oil.

“11100010001010111000111000110110000011101011101100011
000111110001010101100001010100011100010101000001111010101
011010101011111010110110110001000011110110101101010000011
101010001110011010101011011101000110111011101100101001010
000111.”

The man sits up suddenly in the bed and looks at Yuri with an unreadable expression on his face. Eyes bulging, he opens his mouth to spew forth yet another series of binary numbers at incredible speed. *Tomorrow you'll be a modem*, Yuri thinks. *But no one will be able to connect you to anything*.

The man is now standing on his two quivering legs, like some vulgar sort of robot in the process of rebooting, just barely hanging on to the last traces of his motor skills and balance. He points at Yuri with his finger and continues to jabber his long series of zeros and ones.

Yuri decides to risk a try. You never know. “I need to take neurobiological samples. I want to help you. We might have a chance of better understanding what we're dealing with.”

The man doesn't hear, or doesn't understand, or doesn't seem to, or doesn't give a damn.

His eyes bulge uncontrollably from their sockets. The blood rises to his face in a wave of scarlet ire. He staggers toward Yuri, his trembling index finger still pointed directly at the young man.

“10101000110100000111101001000101100101001110110001111
110001010110110110001111100010101011000010101110001010101
11000110101010001010110001010101000001100110.”

The man doesn't really pose a threat, but Yuri needs those neurobiological samples. And he has no time to lose. Realizing that any

discussion is impossible, he looks at the man for an instant. Nothing more now than throwaway parts. Just barely recyclable.

“11110000111001010111000111011010011101010100011101110
0001110110001110000110010001101100011010101011111.”

Yuri takes a late-model Taser from his shirt pocket and puts a clean stop to the continuing output of numeric language. High-penetration microdiodes. Target zone: thorax and encephalon. A barrage of neuro-blocking impulses. Myriad tiny flashes of light interwoven into a grid. The man sinks to the floor in a clean, fluid, perfect movement. It is at the moment of losing consciousness that you regain your balance, thinks Yuri as he prepares the bioprobes, the microscanners and tubes. For an added measure of safety, he injects the man with one milligram of a mild narcoleptic.

The man is no longer shaking; he lies unconscious and silent.

He seems finally at peace.

As he conducts the various biotests, Yuri thinks to himself that in this state at least the man isn't suffering anymore; he isn't afraid; he isn't feeling his body emptied of his self.

He probably deserves these few minutes of happiness, in this sorry world.

Autostrada. At one time, Chrysler Campbell had told him, it was called South Side—for the south side of the highway then in construction, along which Junkville would hoist its slag heaps and garbage.

The highway, which was intended to connect a transcity network in Ontario with another important expressway located on the New York–Vermont border, was never completed. Nor was its branch line toward Grand Junction and Quebec around ten kilometers farther north, which had come to be known as Deadlink. Like all the other city renovation projects in the Territory. Like everything that was never finished. That is, like everything. The cosmodrome, heart and soul of the Territory, is nothing more now than a concrete esplanade on which the southwestern winds pile drifts of sand. The entire World has stopped.

And given what he saw today, and in the few preceding days, there can be hardly any doubt that it is Man himself who has stopped.

In the middle of nowhere.

Autostrada has become the principal peripheral quarter located to the north of Junkville, at the end of this large ribbon of Recyclo concrete with eight express lanes, crossed at regular intervals by a covered passageway made of anti-UV Plexiglas and studded every hundred meters with high pylons bearing flower-shaped bunches of sodium streetlamps in anodized aluminum.

Everything on the highway was carefully stripped to build Autostrada and its neighboring townships, including Snake Zone (Yuri's home), Neo Pepsico, Clockwork Orange, and even parts of Little Congo, whose distinctive gleam he can see in the distance. The communities involved had shared both the work and the spoils. The small township of Tin Machine, for example, a recent but determined rival of the old oligarchy of Little Congo, was entirely built of steel girders and almost all the metal parts that could be salvaged from the adjacent section of the abandoned highway; its silvery shine had given rise to its name.

The much larger Autostrada runs parallel to the eight-lane highway from the city's western limit to its center. It is the biggest township in Junkville after Vortex, located a little farther south; he can see its long cubist cavalcade, built of machines of every type.

Autostrada had had the right to the lion's share of the plunder from the defunct highway: Recyclo concrete, composite pillars, searchlights, electric circuitry, kilometers of aluminum piping and guardrails, even part of the foundations—almost all of it is now grouped on the natural plateau that overlooks the highway. And as the township has grown larger the expressway has disappeared, an inexorable sort of urban vampirism; soon nothing will be left but an expanse of ochre dirt yielding the occasional metal scrap not yet recycled by Junkville, this city where nothing new is ever created, and where everything is always transformable at will.

On the other side of what was once a portion of the highway—the name of which no one remembers now—on the north side, is a large perimeter encompassing the hectares of parched savanna threatened by the further expansion of the desert, empty parking lots periodically invaded by herds of gray-green tumbleweeds, great tarred squares filled with clouds of airborne sand, steppe vegetation, a few old industrial lots recycled long ago by the neighboring city-vampire, and, three or four kilometers away, the concentration-camp architecture of the enormous residential block that has

been home to the human proletariat of Grand Junction's cosmodrome for decades.

Omega Blocks.

Twenty districts. Each district is made up of two high concrete towers connected by FibroGlass passageways and a transversal slab linking the roofs of the structures and covering the highest floors with translucent composite, each with two one-megawatt micro-windmills and a series of photovoltaic sensors crowning the whole with their pylons and bright surfaces. Two districts facing each other form a "quadrant;" each district connects to the others via the same architectural setup, for a total of four districts, forty towers and as many windmills, five times that number of photovoltaics, ten quadrants, and a total of six hundred and forty floors, four hundred intertower walkways, and forty horizontal overhangs, twelve thousand eight hundred apartment blocs, one hundred and sixty elevator cages, four times that number of service stairways, and almost twenty thousand kilometers of cables of every kind, all of them now useless.

If not for these few holdover communities—surviving as best they can inside the high twenty-floor buildings, the population concentrated on the lowest, most accessible, most sandstorm-resistant floors—if not for these scattered groups of half-families and half-humans, Omega Blocks would have been slowly devoured, day after day, tower after tower, district after district, quadrant after quadrant, floor after floor, apartment block after apartment block, by the city-vampire that recycles everything and is separated from its possible prey only by what was once an abandoned section of highway and is now just an eviscerated ramp turning gradually into a sometimes-stormy valley and a few square kilometers of wasteland, parking lots covered with wild grasses and rampant ground ivy, and abandoned hangars inhabited only by pieces of metal skeletons.

Junkville itself is a sort of urban predator. If it had the means to expand over the entire Territory, it would doubtlessly end by absorbing all the other communities and their respective habitats; it would transform all the townships into hills of recyclable garbage. If it had the strength, it would engulf the southwestern part of Quebec, the southeastern part of Ontario, the state of Vermont, and much of New York State as well, and it would finish by imposing its own ecology onto that of the sandy desert from the Midwest and Texas.

Its own ecology—that of an eternally recommencing desert.

7 > *BEFORE AND AFTER SCIENCE*

Chrysler has agreed to meet him on Omega 13, the district of their childhood. It isn't routine; nothing is ever systematic with Chrysler, who has broken with a wide range of posturban survival techniques since his earliest youth; a simple, random action, but one that never fails to produce. The double monad rises toward the cobalt dome of the mid-afternoon sky, totalitarian architecture with no more totality, part of a twentieth-century dream lost in the midst of desert-threatened wasteland, two tall columns linked by an umbilicus of translucent fibers through which the light explodes in a volley of golden sparks across the vast concrete surfaces.

To the west, the sun is sinking on the Ontarian frontier, an enormous orange disk sending its immobile rays in all directions, trapped in the ashy sky as if in a crystal still blackened with carbon.

"Did you talk to Pluto?"

"Yes."

"You saw the two new cases?"

"Yes."

"You took samples?"

"Yes, obviously."

"How many did you see in all?"

"The two he told me about: one on the southern face of Midnight Oil, not far from the house of that guy who died the night before, the other in Ultrabox."

"Pluto told me there might be other cases. In Autostrada, for example."

"I didn't find anything there, but Autostrada is next to Snake Zone. I'll put my informants there on the case and tonight I'll go back for another look. What about you?"

“I managed to get four samples from the six new cases in Omega. One of them is already dead—no surprise. Another one disappeared; no one knows what happened to him. He just literally vanished into nature.”

“It isn’t exactly nature.”

“Well, a very good simulation.”

“Listen—with the data from the other time I think we can get to work. We should start right away, I think.”

“No kidding,” says Chrysler thoughtfully. “You think it’s urgent, too?”

“If Link de Nova can’t counter this second mutation, then I think it’s safe to say we’re all, *all* fucked. Even you and me, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve got a plan?”

“Bribes. We’ll need to show Link de Nova a case, and fast. He has to at least test his powers against this new version of the thing. He has to try. Fast.”

“You’re right. Might as well know as soon as possible if we’re all going to die or not. The whole world can organize its own funeral. All rites included, for the first and last time.”

“Chrysler, I don’t know why, but I still think Link de Nova is part of the solution. I still think he’s closely linked to the Metastructure, or rather to its breakdown. They have a lot of common points that neither of them knows much about, or is even aware of. Remember—he was even born on the exact day of the End of the Megamachine.”

“What can he have in common with an entity that is not only mechanical but dead? I’d think you would understand things a little better.”

“It may be dead, but somehow it still exists, if you look at what’s happening—it’s even like it planned this, to ensure its continued evolution. You want to know what I think? It can exist precisely because it died. Its entire life before 2057 was just a gestation period. Its real life began on the day of its death.”

Chrysler is silent for long seconds, then he nods his head southward. “What did Pluto say to you about his guy, the mysterious Professor?”

“That he wants to see both of us as soon as possible. I think this Professor knows someone in Grand Junction. But I have the impression that Pluto doesn’t really know what’s going on; like his friend from Texas is deliberately keeping that part of the truth from him, for reasons of prudence or I don’t know what.”

“Really? Pluto has talked to me about this guy a lot over the past few months, but I think he told you more in one meeting than he told me in six or seven.”

“He needs us, but he doesn’t want to admit it.”

“Who, Pluto?”

“Yes. I think he believes we might be able to find what Professor Mysterious is looking for.”

“And what is Professor Mysterious looking for?”

“As far as I understood it, he’s looking for a man. Here, in Grand Junction. And I’m guessing that this man lives in one of the places where we are among the privileged few to be able to enter freely. And to get out again.”

“Are you talking about HMV?”

“Yes. The more I think about it, the more obvious it seems.”

“Goddamn, could this professor know about the existence of Link de Nova?”

“No, I doubt it. The man in question—let’s call him the Professor’s friend—lives in HMV, I think, and he is waiting for a delivery, with the Professor’s complicity and Pluto’s, too—and you know Pluto’s specialty.”

“A delivery? Wait—his *specialty*? Technical documents?”

“The Professor’s friend is expecting *a delivery of books*. Real ones. Thousands of them. Maybe even tens of thousands. Pluto didn’t know exactly. A whole library, he said.”

“Shit,” says Chrysler Campbell in astonishment. “*Books*. Fucking books.”

“*Thousands* of books, Chrysler. We must have the right to a piece of the pie. We’ll take what we need.”

“When is this library supposed to arrive?”

“Four or five weeks, I think. The beginning of February. They’ll have to cross the North Atlantic in the middle of winter in a diesel-powered boat from the last century.”

“And Pluto will need us to escort the Professor through the Territory of Grand Junction, am I right?”

“Yep, that’s about the size of it.”

“Who is this Professor?”

“I don’t know his name. Pluto kept things strictly anonymous. But he crossed the whole middle of the former USA—from Texas!—to come here.

I think this library is extremely important, and worth payment of a lot more than boxes of instruction manuals.”

“What do you mean?”

“This guy, this Professor, participated in the last Metastructure update program, two or three years before it destroyed itself.”

This time Chrysler Campbell doesn’t answer. This crucial piece of information, coming as it does after all the others, acts as a sort of miraculous keystone. Suddenly, the whole painstakingly built edifice, until now lacking its final form, comes into existence, into possibility, into reality.

“Professor Mysterious” was a Metastructure specialist twelve or thirteen years earlier, just before its autocontamination. A terrible silent question has taken form in Chrysler Campbell’s head. And Yuri, as is so often the case, senses it like a ghostly invisible wave passing between their two brains.

“Yes, that’s it. The Professor seems to think that their final ‘update’ could have been the cause of the End of the Metastructure; that is undoubtedly the reason for his coming here. He’s been looking for the right man to take delivery of the European library for years, Pluto told me. The shit hit the fan in Europe a long time ago.”

“Did you say Europe? Where, exactly?”

“That’s the most interesting part, if you ask me.”

“Where, Yuri?”

“I could only get snippets of information out of Pluto before I had to go to Midnight Oil South, but he talked about Italy, and seemed very tense when he talked about it. He didn’t give me any more detail than that.”

“Italy?”

“Rome. And I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since he told me. I’ve come to a conclusion that seems very plausible to me; I did some research on the microcomputer Link fixed for me. There’s a huge general encyclopedia in the hard drive.”

“Okay, Yuri. Italy. So what?”

“Some libraries there survived the Grand Jihad and the fresh conflicts that erupted after the Fall of the Metastructure.”

“And?”

“I can only think of one place in the world that would have the means to preserve dozens, even hundreds of thousands, of books, and to send an entire cargo of them across the Atlantic and the American Northeast—to

where? To Grand Junction, a poor lost corner of the world between Canada and what used to be the state of New York, which just happens to have a few surviving Christian communities and one young man who can put life back into machines. Are you following me?”

A light seems to go on in Chrysler Campbell’s head, like the gestating bubble of a universe demanding with irresistible force to be born then and there.

“Oh yes,” Campbell says coldly. “I follow you. I understand perfectly well that we’re about to have a lot of trouble on our hands. I have to show you something. The future.”

Like every other quadrant in Omega Blocks, this one is composed of two districts, two twin towers facing each other above a vast rectangle of Recyclo concrete, the middle of which contains a small eucalyptus garden long since dried out by the desert wind.

District 1 is located at the southwestern tip of Omega Blocks; from it, the large hole of the border highway and the cement townships of Autostrada can be seen.

The man that died this morning lived here, on the sixth floor, in apartment 6.

They walk with rapid steps across the sandy floor of the lobby, their footsteps echoing in the enormous concrete cube.

The sand is like a liquid—it seeks to infiltrate every place it possibly can, and when confronted with a mass it cannot flow into or around, it piles up like reservoir water against a dam. Thus here, as well as at the edges of the deserts and all throughout Mohawk Territory, the dunes are gathering around obstacles both natural and artificial—buttes, mesas, buildings, ruins, and garbage and slag heaps.

Junkville is half encircled by waves of sand, like a dusty sea whose tides are dictated by the Midwestern simoons.

Moreover, the desert is a veritable topological-combat strategist. Not only does it advance forward, pushed by the dominant winds, but it executes “flea jumps” during storms or when it is caught up in a rising current. It settles dozens, even hundreds, of kilometers away from its original resting place, and sometimes, when the local conditions are right, it masses in place to form a sort of anti-oasis, a beachhead of moving sand in a semiarid

region heretofore protected from the ocean of silica. Thus the Territory of Grand Junction, like the entire ex-state of New York, is dotted with microdeserts that form the front line of an army of sand moving in from northern Ohio.

There is an analogy to be made between this storm of sand from southern Pennsylvania and what is happening, invisibly, in the Territory, he tells himself. The storm causes the desert to advance a few meters more into the state of New York; it deploys miniature armadas of silica throughout the Territory, continuing its scouting work, breaking the battlefield down into a collection of microdeserts that will eventually, little by little, attach themselves to one another like semisolid lakes connected by other lakes of sand deposited by an aerial tsunami in passing.

Death, in Grand Junction as in the rest of the world, strikes in a manner similar to that of these desert storms. It is a sort of front that advances and destroys, slowly but surely, all human life in its path. And it also has its “parachutists,” which take up positions at the rear, attacking where it is most unexpected, and in ways impossible to predict.

Death is analogous, now, to this endlessly expanding desert. Death has become a strategist; no longer content with piling up corpses on the field of battle, it conducts operations down to the smallest detail. Generalissimo Muerte. Feldmarschall Tod. Major General Death.

Here in Omega Blocks, the configuration of space possesses its own specificity, as does each zone in the Territory. In order to withstand tornadoes and storms, the inhabitants of this region have abandoned the top floors, where all the windows are now broken, the apartment blocks saturated with sand flying in from all directions. To avoid problems related to the proximity of peripheral dunes or sand whirled into flurries by “naturally” created wind tunnels occurring between the buildings in their monoclonal verticality, various local clans have bought up the lower and middle floors—entire buildings between floors 4 or 5 and floors 12 or 13.

Death is astonishingly similar to the desert in an especially formal way, Yuri thinks. Not because it “destroys life”—all life forms, including man, adapt very well to their ecology—but the death of the Metastructure, that global evolution system turned global devolution system, seems itself like a *completed* form of the desert. Like a liquid, it is penetrating every orifice of this reality already largely eaten away by the catastrophic End of the machines, de-mechanized though it has become a co-mechanical prosthesis

of the World. Like a solid, it can amass its forces in static waves suddenly freed by some purely internal dynamic. It is becoming its own phenomenon; it is the consequence of nothing other than itself. It no longer attacks the mechanical or the biological, but rather that which maintains an ontological tension between the two—language itself. It is neither a computer virus nor its “natural” equivalent, and yet it acts with the combined strength of such entities; it is liquid and solid; it is invisible and renders language blind; it is silent and turns mechanical chatter into the only horizon available to what remains of human thought on this planet.

Yuri thinks all this to himself as he and Campbell approach apartment block 0606, the home of the latest victim. The one Chrysler has already visited—just this morning, as the body was being taken away by the authorized members of a Triad of traffickers in biological organs from Vortex Townships.

It was here that Chrysler Campbell saw the “thing” in action.

It was here that Chrysler Campbell saw the phantom threatening to become reality, the one Yuri understands without really being able to imagine it.

Chrysler has seen death close up. He has seen the “superdeath” of the Metastructure, the one that means the death of its aphidian parasite, man, as well. He has been able to see what the “thing” had made of its unfortunate victim.

“Expect the worst,” he murmurs simply, as he opens the door.

Yuri stares at the scene for a long time, uncomprehending.

Yes, of course, he understands what he is seeing, but only as separate components of an overall structure that remains absolutely unknowable; none of these pieces forms any sort of unit with the others. Whatever it is, it is impossible to extract from this primordial chaos. It really is the worst. Pure abstraction, generating the same abstraction in the brain of the man confronting it. His understanding remains disconnected from all reality; he just cannot proceed past the stage of simple visual perception to any kind of true cognition.

It is comprehensible in a limited way, but it makes no sense.

Or, more exactly, it has no form.

“It’s logical, wouldn’t you say? What do you think of it, Yuri?”

Yuri can find no words to reply to his friend’s almost sarcastic queries; cautiously, he surveys what the dead man’s residence has become during

the night.

What he sees is inconceivable—but at the same time, he knows he is seeing what the man in question has turned into. One problem emerges at the forefront of an infinity of others. “Didn’t you tell me that the guys from Vortex Townships came to take the body away this morning?”

Chrysler Campbell gives him a grin that could swallow all the deserts mankind has abandoned.

“At this stage, the physical body no longer has any importance to the ‘thing’—the Post-Machine, as you call it. It’s just material that can be recycled for a while, then thrown away and replaced at will.”

Yuri gazes at apartment block 0606. It begins to spin in his head.

Death has remained here in this space. The decomposition of the body means nothing in the end—or, rather, it is only a means. Even just a consequence. What counts is the symbolic exchange to which the “thing” has committed itself in order to obtain its objective. In the final phase of linguistic devolution, man is nothing more than a modem spitting out incessant volleys of digital white noise, strings of binary numbers representing the information being emptied out of his central nervous system and his principal vital metabolic centers. He has no idea where the “thing” is storing all this biological data, but now, Yuri realizes, its strategy is to transform humanity into a vast catalogue of digitalized organs. The “thing” wants to annihilate all thought, all language, all cognition, far more than it wishes to destroy physical bodies. This is why it is conducting an exchange—a swap—a downloading of data in two senses, as if into a network.

A human body has ejected its most intimate structure into the world in a long series of binary numbers, in pure machine language. Now the Thing-World has completed its work by transforming the thus-cadaverized human into a colossal mass of information of all types that carpets the walls, doors, floor, and ceiling—every inch of the man’s monobloc apartment. Here is the entirety of his genome in a vast blanket of the four letters symbolizing the bases of DNA. Uninterrupted sequences of As, Cs, Gs, and Ts fill the entire space in all directions. Three billion pairs of nucleotides and billions of dual-based nucleotides released by the cortical neurons and some specific anatomical information in various forms, but recreating with fidelity the biological model of the man who lived here and ended his days speaking like a machine reduced to its most rudimentary level of expression.

And now “he” is here. All of him. All his “plans.” Laid bare on the external surface of his own world.

“If we had the technical means to do it, we could rebuild this man—what was his name, again?—oh yes, Mr. Desmond Dorval, just by following the coordinates splattered all over this place.”

“You really think so?” asks Yuri, without real conviction.

“Link fixed one of those hyperscanners from the ’40s for me. I recorded everything; it’s phenomenal—even the foundations of his psyche, the really vital part of his memory—everything was digitalized and it’s all catalogued here. This is *his home* in every sense of the word. And it’s three-dimensional; when it ran out of room after superimposing several layers on the walls, it suspended the data in the air—look over there.”

Chrysler Campbell points to a swarm of ones and zeros, hanging like vaguely shimmering points of nothingness in the fading light streaming through the windows.

“I think the phenomenon is continuing to evolve; it’s changed since this morning. It must parallel the physical decomposition of the body, wherever it is.”

Why leave digital vestiges of a particular individual’s time on this Earth, in the form of its completely digitalized organism, affixed through an unknown, autonomous, mysterious procedure, made of a sort of black light, on all the walls and even in the cubic space of his residence? Why make external what was internal? Why make mechanically readable the uniqueness of a single human being? Why transform his residence into a “materialized symbol” of his own body? Why turn this space into a box filled with all his biological data?

The answer, of course, is contained in each of these questions.

Death must become immortal.

Language must be subsumed entirely into its service.

Better still, language itself must become death.

The last “living” phase of the contaminated individual summarizes the entire process: he passes from the death of language to the language of death, to death language—*thanato-logos*.

A man lived, and now he is nothing but stored code and graphics. Stored numbers. Stored information. “Living”—that is, *above* death—symbolic material.

The “thing” might very well annihilate all forms of life this way, animal or artificial, everything on the planet, to replace them with a life-size anthroponumeric museum occupying a few sites scattered throughout the global desert, a vast digital catalogue of what humanity had been and, still more terrible, what it had become.

8 > *VANISHING POINT*

Leaving the tower, Yuri and Chrysler Campbell soon detect signs of human activity on the cement-paved tarmac of the neighboring quadrant.

Yuri instantly recognizes the yellow uniforms of one of Vortex Townships' main necro Triads.

In Junkville, this type of uniform is as easily spotted as the plumage of a vulture circling in the sky.

Someone has died right here in Omega 2, even as they were visiting the apartment of a man who died the previous night in the adjoining district.

Chrysler knows everyone in Omega, and Yuri is beginning to make a name for himself in Junkville; the guys in yellow won't do anything to prevent either of them from entering the work site.

Yuri can just make out a stretcher holding a shiny blue body bag. The bag hasn't yet been closed. As he gets closer to the circle of human scavengers, he can see the upper body of a young woman in her twenties, about his own age. Pretty, blond, extremely pale, wide-open eyes red with burst blood vessels staring unseeingly at the sky, which is greenish blue and spotted with brown, a camouflage pattern from the foundries of some Nazi Vulcan. It was the last sky of this unknown young woman's life, the last before she was suddenly stricken down, and now it is under this sky that she will be taken to one or another of the several biological laboratories operating in Junkville.

The men of the necro Triads go about their work like true professionals; they have years of experience in this sort of task. Later, they will conduct a complete examination of the body, then deliver it to the doctors at some clandestine biolaboratory, who will cut it up into its various parts and place it immediately on the market. The labs are often headed by Neon Park survivors, specialists in human anatomy who share the profits with the Triad vultures.

The necros, busy with postmortem biopsies and various microbiological tests, look like misplaced cosmodrome astronauts in their protective suits.

Now they have moved on to loading the body into the bag, pushing the stretcher over to a gasoline-powered pickup and hoisting it carefully into the back of the truck. Their preliminary tests must have convinced them that nearly all of the victim's biological organs are functional, and thus salable, despite her premature death.

Campbell is talking to the guy who called the Triad; he lives in Block 13, like them. His name is Slim Dubois. Campbell is obviously inquiring about the transaction that has just taken place; he doesn't even try to be covert about it as he speaks to this negotiator with the necros.

Yuri catches up to them as the old, converted Dodge pickup takes off in the direction of Autostrada; he can just catch the gist of their conversation.

"Did you know her?"

"Just barely," replies Slim Dubois. "She was a refugee from the Midwest; she moved into Block 2 less than six months ago. I think she came from Indiana originally."

"You were the one who saw her first?"

"Not exactly. It was an old dingo from Omega 15. But I was passing by and heard her shouting and sort of praying, you know; she's still holding on to her personal god from the UHU days, so ..."

"All right, but you're the one who called the necros in from Vortex."

"Yeah. Because of her I'll be able to survive for a good month. Maybe even two. She was in perfect condition."

"Do you know what she died of?"

"I managed to get a few intelligible words out of the crazy old woman from Block 15. She saw the girl fall like a ton of bricks on the tarmac in Block 2 and took her back to her flat. They had just passed each other when the girl went right down. A textbook case, Chrysler. A vital system failed in one second. You know as well as I do how often that's happening these days."

"Have you heard about other cases in Omega?"

"Like this girl? What rock have you been hiding under, Campbell? It's been going on for more than ten years now."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I mean really bizarre cases, like the guy from Block 1 who died tonight, or the one from Omega 17, who only

speaks in binary numbers now. Or the one from Block 10, who's been missing since yesterday."

"Oh, right, I get it. That started about a month ago. It's still pretty marginal; nobody knows much at all about it."

"But you were also the one who called the Triads for the guy from Block 1, or am I wrong?"

"Yeah, I knew him. Desmond Dorval. When I came by to see him this morning, just before you got here, he had been dead for hours. I just did my job. The Triads pay me to recover bodies in Omega Blocks and all the way to Deadlink."

"Oh, really? I didn't know you'd become a paid employee, Slim. Hope business is good. Now I'll tell you what I think, if you don't mind. You've chosen a career with a busy future; you'll see. Except that, like all of us, you never know when you'll be on the wrong side of the body bag."

The man doesn't reply; his face is set and his mouth clamped shut.

Chrysler Campbell's smile is forced and frozen. He hisses a cold "So long, Slim" and turns to Yuri, indicating the almost-palpable sea of work in front of them.

So much work.

So much work to fight this living death.

Chrysler lives around fifteen kilometers northwest of Omega Blocks on what he calls his "hunting ground," in a desolate area known as Aircrash Circle. It is more or less equidistant from Junkville to the south, Deadlink to the east, and Surveyor Plateau on the Ontario border, as he often boasts. "I'm smack in the middle of the canvas," he says. "If anything at all moves in the southern part of the Territory, the whole canvas vibrates and I'm there in a flash."

Aircrash Circle was the site of a plane crash during the Fall of the Metastructure. A few migrant pioneers, most of them from Junkville, had built shantytown encampments there using the plentiful debris of the antique Airbus A380, which had suffered the failure of all its navigation systems over the Territory en route to Montreal. Chrysler's parents had joined the population shortly after the birth of the township. His father worked intermittently at the cosmodrome and they lived for a while in Heavy Metal Valley, where Chrysler had been born, and it was to this

circumstance that he probably owed his first name; his mother had been involved in various types of trafficking in Monolith Hills and Junkville, on the western border of Autostrada, which was then in full expansion. The family then moved to Omega, where Campbell met Yuri in Block 13; finally, his parents decided to settle on the site of the plane crash. All their lives they had helped their child to grow up the hard way, in the southern part of the Independent Territory. And the boy had learned his lessons well.

His parents only survived for a few months after the End of the Metastructure. They disappeared, along with a third of Grand Junction's population, when the town was wiped from the map—and so had Yuri's parents, and so many of the others they had known in Omega Blocks and elsewhere. Then, during the Second Fall six years later, and in the time since, a good half of the remaining survivors died in their turn, just as others were dying all over the rest of the planet.

Chrysler had somehow, miraculously, slipped through the invisible net of death.

Chrysler and a few other lucky ones, like his young friend Yuri, had come out alive and well.

And thanks to the youth from Heavy Metal Valley, thanks to Gabriel Link de Nova, thanks to the boy who can heal machines, things just keep getting better and better for Chrysler.

It even occurred to him recently that he might still have a chance to become an old man. A chance not to die young. A chance not to die before his time. A chance to die before the World does.

A chance to die like men have died for millions of years.

The western sky is indigo. The sun has set behind the purplish humps of the Ontarian hills. Like the light from a fluorescent bulb about to flicker out, a vast, wavering bronze shadow extends into the heart of the stagnant mid-cirrus clouds at the zenith, where the first pale stars are appearing, where the cosmos is the color of tempered steel, where no one can go any longer.

To the south, Yuri can see the nocturnal vibration—like a black swarm gathering on the dark horizon—of the sandstorm now crossing the southern border of the former state of New York. Chrysler Campbell, behind the wheel of the antique hybrid-motor pickup, whistles a tuneless, nameless melody; he seems reflective, as usual. A calm smile hovers about his lips,

and his every move is made with the relaxed precision of a machine, his thoughts hidden from the outside world, and even from himself.

Chrysler has always played the role of the older brother Yuri never had. For him, thinking is, by its very nature, an intrinsically dangerous act. *If what you think doesn't lead you to take a risk, even a small one, than better to abstain*, he has often said from Yuri's earliest youth. Always think against yourself. Always think that the true danger is not to confront it.

After years of acquaintance, Yuri has eventually come to realize that thought, according to Chrysler, is a form of silent war, and is utterly without mercy.

Yuri knows that Chrysler killed a man one day during the First Fall, shortly after the deaths of his parents—of their parents—when the guy, an old pedophile suddenly liberated from neurochemical control, had tried to molest him in a dried-out field north of Omega Blocks. Yuri even saw the body; Chrysler had shown it to him, stretched out prone in a dead, thorny bush uprooted from soil ravaged by the summer storm that had just rampaged through the Territory. The glassy eyes, bulging toward the gray sky of that rainy day, were forever fixed in Yuri's memory as if by a photochemical developing bath. The body showed the marks of several hematomas around the face; one of the eyes was nothing more than a purplish blue mass; the other was filled with blood. The nose appeared to have been broken and the dislocated jaw hung at a bizarre angle toward the base of the neck, where several bloody teeth lay scattered. Other than that, though, nothing. No trace of a mortal knife wound or a hole made by a bullet or other projectile, or of trauma caused by a blunt object. Not even the characteristic signs of strangulation.

Yuri saw only Chrysler's hands, puffy and stained with reddish fluid gleaming like oil in the rain.

On that day, Yuri had just turned eleven years old. He understood then, for the first time, that to kill a man, brutal strength, vice, and the experience of age are not unequivocal conditions.

Against the organic prudence of age stands the *mechanical* madness of youth.

Against the ignominy of vice and human perversion stands the cold violence of true inhumanity.

Against brute force stand combat techniques.

Chrysler Campbell had been initiated into the mixed martial arts by an old master of Pride, a free-combat organization that had peaked in popularity at the very beginning of the century.

Brazilian jujitsu, Thai boxing, Okinawan karate, Russian sambo, drop-boxing, and several techniques derived from Korean tae kwon do form the basic ingredients of this ultraviolent fighting, where every type of blow and hold are permitted, even recommended.

His instructor was a former Russian army lieutenant who had risen to prominence around 2015 via a meteoric career in the great arenas of Tokyo under the strict eye of his own master, Fedor Emilianenko, the former heavyweight champion of the discipline and a former Soviet military officer himself, and more recently an elite wrestling instructor. When the Metastructure fell, the old Russian instructor had for more than thirty years been running a small mixed-martial-arts school on Surveyor Plateau, training many of the gladiators who fought in the arenas of Monolith Hills. Chrysler had already become one of his top students. Then the man died, as did almost all of his pupils.

Chrysler Campbell remained.

He retained what he had learned.

The art of killing a man with a single punch.

9 > *MIDNIGHT OIL*

Night has fallen on the coal black peak of Midnight Oil. It seems to descend on the township as if seeking its primordial niche. It is a moonless, heavy night, very black, with only a few stars. It is a perfect night for the Post-World.

A desert night, mirroring the desert night that is engulfing the Earth.

Pluto Saint-Clair looks closely at the man sitting across from him as he lights a long joint of homegrown tobacco.

Professor Paul Zarkovsky. Twenty-two years have passed since Saint-Clair earned his degree at MIT under the man's doctoral supervision. He hasn't changed, this Russian-American specializing in transfinite numbers who conceived the final version of the Metastructure—the *final* one in a real sense, the one that led to the death of the Machine-World—or, rather, to the strange state of postmortem survival in which it continues to annihilate humanity.

This man, Pluto knows, is of vital importance, much more vital even than he can imagine. He hasn't come here by chance. The End of the Metastructure is closely tied to the Territory of Grand Junction. Rumors to that effect are constantly swirling around the entire American Northeast.

And Pluto knows a crucial fact: one of the many rumors is true—or, at least, it comes closest to touching the vast coldness of the truth. Pluto knows a *secret*. An old, educated, former prostitute from Deadlink, Canadian by birth, who used to work in Monolith Hills, had told him the secret one day, shortly before her death during the Second Fall. He is the only one who knows it now, and, more importantly, the only one who has grasped what it implies.

This is why he has done everything in his power to ensure that the Professor's journey across North America will go as smoothly as possible. This is why he has sent messages of every kind. This is why he has

chartered a taxi and driver from Clockwork Orange, one specializing in desert crossings, to bring him all the way here to Ohio.

The man is even taller than Pluto, with astonishingly steady pale blue eyes and thinning blond hair. His wispy beard is steel gray. He must be sixty years old now. He is the Professor.

He has crossed more than four thousand kilometers of desert to get here. He walked more than five hundred miles through the Great Lakes region.

The man hasn't changed, really. A specialist in transfinite numbers and the genetic codes of retroviruses. A mountain climber. An experimental hiker. A lover of Polish vodka, French literature, and English football.

A man who could, back in the day, beat a computer at chess.

A man who has crossed North America to meet up with another man—another man who is awaiting a delivery of books. Thousands of books.

Pluto Saint-Clair looks at the Professor, who looks back at him calmly, without blinking. It is undoubtedly time to bring a little humanity back to this world filled with darkness and desert. To begin the conversation with the pleasantries of a warm welcome. To refuse to allow the night-desert falling on Earth to dictate the conditions of that welcome. To create the semblance of an impression that they are still living in a World.

"I hope the BlackSky Ridge capsules are to your liking, Professor."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, Pluto. What counts for me, as you know, is to find Djordjevic as fast as possible."

Pluto Saint-Clair frowns; his search has produced nothing. He is thinking more and more about putting Yuri McCoy and Chrysler Campbell on the case. "I'll track him down, Professor; don't worry. He must have changed his identity."

"No, the last time I heard anything about him was when I had just come back from all those years in Europe, and they told me he was still living under that name. He didn't have any reason to change it, especially after the End of the Metastructure."

"Where is the last place you heard he was living?"

"I met one of his friends in Mexico, an academician who spent a lot of time with him during his years in Italy. He told me Djordjevic was in Texas—Corpus Christi, specifically—already half flooded by the rise of sea level after the automatic dikes broke down. I went there and searched the city and the areas around it with a fine-tooth comb for months; then I decided to

follow a very vague trail that led me to Canada, and you. That's how I managed to contact you, later, with the help of the Missouri refugees."

"We'll find him," says Pluto, in an unintentionally sinister tone.

"How big is it here, Pluto?"

"Here? Where do you mean? Junkville, or the whole Mohawk Territory?"

"The Territory. What's the area?"

"Around seventy kilometers north to south, from Quebec to New York; a little more from east to west, from Ontario to the Vermont border. Not that any of those names mean anything anymore."

"Population?"

"As you know, Professor, we don't have statistics anymore."

"Give me an approximate figure—how big? Just so I can have an idea."

"Well ... just before the Fall, at its peak, the Territory had around a million people, half of them in Grand Junction alone. Today I'd estimate the total number at a little more than two hundred and fifty thousand, including the refugees from the Midwest. A third of them live in Grand Junction itself, in Monolith Hills—in the old technological areas or the Enterprise aerostation."

"And here, in Junkville?"

"Junkville? Well, in its boom days in the 2050s, there were about a hundred and fifty thousand. Today, I'd say maybe fifty thousand. Including the waves of refugees."

"I see. Perfect isotopy of phenomenon, whatever its location."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"It's a little complicated to sum up. Let's say that the Metastructure, since its death, has been acting ... shall we say ... according to a process of *infinite division*. Some of us think it is actually imitating ... God."

"Imitating God?"

"Yes. Basically, the procedure consists of constantly dividing in half whatever is left after the previous operation. Except that in the case of the Metastructure, there is a small problem. It always has something left over; its series of divisions can't be perfect, ever. And that's logical. Ontologically logical."

"Ontologically. What does that mean?"

"The Metastructure, or rather the entity that succeeded it, is caught in what we call a system of double constraint. On one hand, it must destroy

humanity. On the other hand, it must destroy humanity. Are you following me?”

“Not at all—but I remember you were already playing around with paradoxes at MIT.”

“This isn’t a paradox in itself. It is the ‘double bind’ of the post-Metastructure: it must destroy humanity, but it must do so indefinitely. It must erase all traces of Man, but its own survival depends on this erasure. So it has to act in such a way that there are always enough humans to perpetuate its efforts at annihilation, all the while dividing this human population in two. So it needs these humans just as it must destroy them; they are indestructible in a way, but they serve the thing as indefinitely recyclable base materials.”

“And that’s why you’ve come all this way from southern Texas?”

“Listen, Pluto, I need to see Djordjevic as soon as possible. I can’t explain it to you all over again. Just agree with me that the death of the Metastructure was only the beginning, okay?”

“Okay, Professor.”

Pluto Saint-Clair remembers what Yuri McCoy told him during his recent visit—a piece of information very similar to the one Paul Zarkovsky has just shared. Only the point of view is different. If he combines the two, he might be able to see the truth—learn the Secret of the Territory. “Professor, I need to warn you first. The Territory of Grand Junction, especially Junkville, has its own laws. It’s a dangerous place if you aren’t familiar with them. We’ll need to call on specialized informants, I’m afraid, and here information is very expensive. More expensive than a working machine. We need to stay on our toes and not commit any faux pas during the investigation. I’m saying ‘we,’ but it would be best if you left the BlackSky Ridge capsule park as little as possible.”

“What exactly are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know, *exactly*. Which makes me worry even more.”

“Listen, Pluto, I didn’t want to talk to you about this. I didn’t want to worry you. But I went out this morning ... for a little walk ...”

Pluto Saint-Clair knits his brow. “Did something happen to you?”

“No, nothing—but it could have. It barely missed us.”

“Us? Who are you talking about? Djordjevic?”

“No, no, not at all. The landlord, I mean. He warned me when I got back.”

“Warned you about what?”

“A man came to BlackSky Ridge. He went to the capsule park and asked to see me. The landlord told him I’d gone out, and the man left without saying another word.”

Pluto feels a cold prickle of fear trickle down his spine. A man came to see the Professor. A man who knows he lives on BlackSky, in a UMan-Home capsule. A man. But what man? “Do you have a description of him?”

“The landlord might be able to give us one. I didn’t think of it at the time—you know, I was tired out from the long trip. I went back to my capsule and slept for the whole afternoon.”

“Has there been any news of this man since then?”

“None, Pluto. I asked the landlord to keep you informed if he comes again when I’m not there.”

“Well done.”

“Yes, I guess. ... How do you think a stranger knew where to find me?”

Pluto Saint-Clair cannot repress a reflexive shudder. “In Junkville, news spreads fast. You shouldn’t stay on BlackSky Ridge.”

“Where do you want me to go?”

“Sleep here tonight, and tomorrow morning you’ll go—we’ll go, I mean—to get your things from the capsule. In the meantime, let’s say I’ll gather the investigative team we’ll need to find your friend.”

Decisions have to be made. They need an immediate plan of action. He will have to call on Chrysler Campbell and Yuri McCoy. They need to gain the upper hand on the night-desert and its creatures, and fast.

“And the man that came looking for me?”

Pluto Saint-Clair does not answer. This man, too—yes—this stranger from who knows where in Junkville—this man who already knows much too much—this man who is yet unaware of its importance—he will deliver him to the two young traffickers from Omega Blocks. Whatever he has come seeking from the Professor, this man will find nothing but death. The death that reigns all over this world.

Dawn, slate blue, spreads its icy glaze over all light, all matter, all darkness.

Through the plastic window of Chrysler’s tiny house, built by his parents from various bits of debris from the Airbus and a few pieces of a standard Combi-Cube, Yuri McCoy contemplates the western edge of the territory;

the hills marking the Ontario border form a purple wave, their rocky crests glowing gently pale in the eastern light, like sea foam frozen for an instant at the summit of a wave about to crash on the shore.

There are still a few vestigial stars in the sky; he even thinks he can see several groups of the particular sparks whose cold, metallic light indicates the presence of the Orbital Ring above them.

Chrysler has just woken him up, not rudely but with military strictness.

There are new cases. Again. Always.

“Tea, as usual?” Chrysler asks, going into the tiny monobloc kitchen.

Yuri notes that he prepares a full samovar; the question was purely formal, a few words of welcome on the threshold of a day that promises to be special. He moves to the center of the room, where an antique plastic camping table is surrounded by airplane seats. As he does so, he gives a mechanical rap to the punching bag suspended midway between floor and ceiling by a heavy chain, hanging above a thick blue tatami mat worn by thousands of falls. He knows this leather bag well; Chrysler brought it from the Surveyor Plateau MMA school years ago. They train with the bag regularly; it was here that Chrysler showed him how to kill a man with a single blow of his fist, here that he told him the best-kept secrets of Russian and Israeli military martial arts.

It is with this bag that Chrysler has lavishly imparted everything he knows.

It is here that Yuri joined the very elite club of those who can deal death with a smile.

“You were sleeping like a rock when she called me. There are two cases at Surveyor Plateau; they developed yesterday. She also confirmed that there have been some new ones since last month on X-15, in Ontario.”

“Your usual informant?”

“Yes.”

“I meant, which one? Old Nora Network, or that young Ethiopian gazelle you regularly screw on Surveyor?”

“Be nice, young idiot. My usual informant is Nora Network. You know I never mix business with sentiment.”

“Sentiment. What a lovely word choice you’ve made there, Chrysler.”

“Don’t act like a Jesuit with me, please.”

“The Jesuits disappeared a long time ago. They were replaced by much better missionaries when UHU came to power.”

Chrysler Campbell half smiles and sighs. “Fine. So you must know I didn’t blast you awake immediately at dawn just because I found out about a few cases in the western part of the Territory.”

“Your informant woke you, and then you woke me to tell me about it, right? By the way, how does she have access to a working transistor radio?”

“A little detail I worked out with Link de Nova quite a while ago, just like I did for Pluto. If I’m going to have an efficient network of informants, they have to be able to relay things to me as fast and as clearly as possible.”

“That seems like the bare minimum, if you ask me.”

“Listen—we’ll go to Surveyor today, and maybe to X-15. And then we’ll have to get back here as fast as possible to conduct our analyses. We have some good stores of data now, and a bit more perspective to work with.”

“Fine with me.”

“But first, let’s get to what I woke you up so early for.”

“I’m listening.”

“Pluto Saint-Clair also called me very early this morning.”

“Ah, does he have news?”

Chrysler looks at him for a moment before pouring tea out of the large samovar that sits enthroned, a large, tarnished silver shell, in the center of the camping table.

“We’re going to go see him. Right away.”

Yuri doesn’t respond; he takes a large gulp of the burning tea, the bitter, smoky taste of which fills his mouth with an invisible clatter.

He guesses that events are probably in the process of taking an unexpected turn. He guesses that the Professor has come here to stay. He guesses that Pluto Saint-Clair wants to introduce them. He guesses that, once that happens, nothing will ever be the same again.

As the rising sun bursts into an orange fireball over the landscape of Air-crash Circle, they begin their drive toward the rutted road that will take them to the old municipal road of the territory.

Chrysler takes the wheel; Yuri does not protest. He rummages in the glove compartment among the antique cassette tapes and pulls out Bob Dylan’s *Nashville Skyline*. *A century old*, he thinks, and slides the tape into

the pickup's player. There have been no radio broadcasts for a long time, obviously, and any sort of compact disc-type digital system disappeared years ago; even in Vortex Townships that kind of machine is becoming rarer and rarer, but magnetic audiotapes still function and so do the devices that play them. As long as there are no microprocessors or other semiconductor-based components in play, the services of the Heavy Metal Valley healer will not be needed.

But can they do without him in their fight against the evil massing on the horizon, more threatening by far than any sandstorm? Would he even be able to do anything? Is he any sort of defense against this post-mortem second mutation, this Third Fall, this thing that attacks not the biological or the mechanical, but language itself?

Yuri doesn't dare try to imagine the consequences of an early death of the young man with the guitar.

He concentrates his attention on the road, which unfurls in a long, dusty ribbon ahead of them, illuminated by the rising sun.

Lay, lady, lay ... Bob Dylan sings softly.

"You've never told me how you and Pluto Saint-Clair know each other," he says to Chrysler.

"I haven't? No, that's right. We met through a guy who's been dead since just after the First Fall; you didn't know him. We had some things in common. We'd studied the same thing at the same university, MIT."

"What did he study, exactly?"

"Operational genetics. He worked on experimental models of androids for some firm at the time; I don't know which one."

"Ah, so he was in the Ring? He worked *up there*?"

"For a few months just before the End of the Metastructure. He thought he'd be able to go back one day, from the cosmodrome, like so many others."

Pluto Saint-Clair's Combi-Cube rises up in front of them, its bright yellow walls shining in the fiery morning sunlight. Yuri meets Chrysler's eyes for a fraction of a second.

He knows they are both thinking the exact same thing.

Chrysler, like him, is already imagining the approaching Armageddon.

Chrysler, like him, knows that the two of them and Link de Nova and, no doubt, the mysterious Professor from Texas, are humanity's sole and meager remaining defense against the coming groundswell.

They both know they probably don't have a chance in Hell.

10 > VENUS AS A BOY

Vegas Orlando has just opened his eyes. The injection was fairly painful, despite the powerful analgesics that were administered before it.

He focuses his gaze on the mobile home—luxurious by local standards—in the center of which is the operating table where he lies prone. Antique twentieth-century furniture mingles with the various tools and devices of a hospital room. It is a place like no other in Junkville. It is the only place where his life might still be worth something.

Everything is proceeding smoothly. Everything is normal. It's all going almost too well.

In any case, he is no longer trembling, and his terrible stomach cramps seem to have disappeared. Just like the man promised him.

The man.

Vegas Orlando contemplates him, his vision still blurry. He is standing to one side, the hypodermic syringe still in his hand.

Jade Uber Silverskin.

A former resident of Neon Park, living here as a refugee for the past ten years. A brilliant career with the necro Triads. A surgeon without equal. Capable of finding remedies—temporary, of course, but functional—for almost any malfunctioning bio-implant, whatever its type, problem, or programmed purpose.

Jade Silverskin, like many of the residents of what used to be Neon Park, had himself autotransformed—body-tuned—several times during the last years before the Fall. He is a specialist in bionic implants and operative transgenics, one of the very rare surviving members of that community. He is the last diamond in an abandoned coal mine.

“He” is neither man nor woman, but a mixture of the two. He has opted for functional hermaphroditism, copied from the genetic codes of animals.

Vegas Orlando knows that before his residence in Neon Park, Silverskin spent several of his adolescent years in Monolith Hills. The reputation of

his androgynous beauty had spread beyond the strip very quickly.

At that time, Silverskin's last name had been "Venus-as-a-boy," a name he had still carried when he joined the transformist community in Neon Park. He worked for one of the kings of the strip—now dead—in a luxury brothel located across from 9900, a vast neural-game arcade that has since become one of the most crowded refugee centers in the city of Grand Junction. Orlando had known him slightly at the time; he was one of the most sought-after prostitutes in Monolith Hills.

Thanks to his coming to Neon Park, his natural feminine charms had been magnificently augmented by all the artifice then offered in the bionic capital of the Northeast. He was as beautiful as a silver Apollo in a beam of light calculated down to the millimeter so as to perfectly illuminate his skin, with its new mercurial luster resulting from his very first body-tuning operation. His transformed epidermis gracefully and wonderfully captured every passing photon; his eyes, strangely bronzed, gazed out on the world with the innate superiority of those humans who dazzle their fellows with the simple perfection of their presence.

He-she is indeed very beautiful—very handsome—whichever; it doesn't matter much, thinks Orlando. And on top of it, he-she is the best doctor in Little Congo—and thus one of the best in the city.

And consequently one of the most expensive. One of the basic rules of the market is that a product's rarity automatically increases its sale price; this is true with every type of business. When life itself becomes rare, the equation remains fundamentally the same—but the multiplying variable rises to another order of grandeur altogether.

A week's reprieve now costs as much as a year's did twelve years earlier. But Vegas Orlando can afford it.

Which is exactly why he decided to visit Jade Silverskin after the malfunction on BlackSky Ridge. The man-woman has just, with a simple series of intravenous hypodermic injections, flooded his nanogenerator with an influx of modified proteins, of which Silverskin keeps a store in his refrigerators. This transgenic implantation could give Orlando up to two weeks of relief.

It's going to cost him half of his gasoline stores, or the equivalent—a young whore from Toy Division, for example.

But Silverskin can do even better. He can do more. It would be even more expensive, but ...

“He” can, he tells Orlando, fit him up with a completely new, still-operational proteinic nanogenerator. It was scavenged by a Triad from a body in Snake Zone, a body whose other implants had failed before the nanogenerator was contaminated.

“But as soon as the new nanoprocessor is installed in your body, I can’t do anything more for you, you know. It might last a year, five years—like your old one—or two days, or three minutes. It isn’t up to me, unfortunately.”

Orlando reflects for a few minutes when the Neon Park hermaphrodite makes this offer. His old bio-implant lasted a full five years. It was a miracle, really. If the new implant only lasts half of that—a third, even—life might actually become possible again.

But fifty or sixty liters of gasoline definitely won’t be enough. Double that wouldn’t be enough, or even triple. Not even a full cistern. Or all the sexual slaves in Toy Division.

What Jade Silverskin is asking of Orlando can be summed up in one simple word.

Betrayal.

True betrayal, when it can guarantee you if not immortality then at least middle age, always comes at an astronomical price.

And in this world—this world that doesn’t even really have the face of a world anymore, but rather that of an old whore barely hanging on to life—betrayal is worth this entire world’s weight in gold.

He accepts, of course. Surprisingly, their interests have quite a bit in common on this point. Both of them know equally as much about what is truly important and, even better, they are both aware of exactly what they do not know—that is, of what is even more important.

The rumor that has been going around the Territory for the last couple of years is based on something real; it is not pure myth, but *legend*—a story composed of facts that have been greatly stretched.

And then there is the man newly arrived from Texas. Silverskin has heard about him through the same network Orlando uses, the one that leads to the old prostitute from Vortex Townships.

There is the two-year-old rumor. And there is the Professor who has just come to town.

Jade Silverskin thinks these two things are closely connected.

And Vegas Orlando, it turns out, is easy to convince.

* * *

The antique 2006 Buick has managed by some miracle to reach one of the highest peaks of Carbon City. From there, it dominates the surrounding slag heaps and even the enormous junkyard of Big Bag Recyclo. It also faces the rocky butte of BlackSky Ridge. It faces the orange-colored capsule homes scattered around its heights. It faces the place where the man from Texas is supposed to turn up at any minute.

Vegas Orlando will not return to the capsule park; that would be a mistake made in panic, just as making himself known to this man, the UManHome park renter, would be. Men talk. That is what men do. And it often costs them their lives.

He will monitor the stranger's movements from here; it is the perfect observation point. From here he has a full 360-degree view of New Arizona, the American refugees' neocolony; of the immense north-south expanse of Vortex Townships; of the hardly smaller east-west stretch of Autostrada; and of all the other, isolated townships—Neo Pepsico, Little Congo, Tin Machine, Snake Zone, and, farther to the south, Ultrabox, Toy Division, Leatherneck Mills, Powder Station, and Midnight Oil. Everything is there under his gaze, spread out like a giant map.

The whole city is at his feet, displaying itself to him like a little whore mechanically doing her striptease act. The whole city is waiting now, waiting for the coming storm.

The sand twists in bright pointillist serpents across the earth; the sky is dirty gray overlaid with bronze. To the south, an ochre wall rises into the clouds; the storm, on its way from Pennsylvania, will cover the whole state; there is no doubt about that. It will probably not die until it reaches Quebec, north of the Territory.

All over the slag heaps and throughout the surrounding slums, men are busying themselves around the windmills and photovoltaic transducers, enveloping them in large plastic tarpaulins so that no flying sand can affect the precious mechanisms.

Dozens of micro-tornadoes whirl in the sky and whip through the town like so many ghosts made of sand and wind, quasi-ectoplasmic figures dancing on the coal heaps and in the gravel pits, on the mountains of garbage, and among the colonies of motley makeshift shelters where men cower fearfully.

Vegas Orlando feels a strange impression come over him. An oddly hard determination; a cold anger, as cold as what is driving him—that is, the desire to survive at any cost, even at the cost of others' lives. An anger toward all those who still have the possibility of imagining a future for themselves, an unspeakable anger, even, toward the man of whom he knows nothing except that he might, perhaps, be in a position to defeat evil itself.

It is the “perhaps” that is proving unbearable. The “perhaps” that is fueling Orlando's anger.

Thanks to Silverskin's little operation, his life expectancy has just doubled. He will have enough time for the androgynous doctor to conduct the biological tests necessary for the implantation of the nanoprocessor. Enough for Orlando to learn as much as he can about the man from Texas.

He has come from so far away. There must be a reason.

The man worked, before the Fall, on the vital systems of the Metastructure.

The reason for his coming must have something to do with the Metastructure. And especially with its death.

And if it has to do with the death of the Metastructure, it has to do with the survival of every human being in the territory.

In the entire world, even.

But above all, it has to do with Orlando's own survival, his survival as the former young prince of Little Congo, and as a new member of Junkville's community of the living dead. It has to do with his future, his past, his present. It has to do with him, more than anything else in this world. It has to do with what is absolutely essential.

11 > I CAN SEE FOR MILES

Here, winter storms are the most violent. It is in winter that three opposing forces—hot, humid winds from the Gulf of Mexico, cold winds from the Arctic, and very hot, dry winds from the Midwest and central Canada—collide in the upper atmosphere to create “supercells” whose titanic storms can generate lightning powerful enough to reduce kilometers of woods to ashes.

The approaching storm won’t be on that scale, but in an hour or two it will have reached the city limits, and in three hours visibility will be reduced to nothing. And the whole town will huddle enclosed in its makeshift huts.

The whole Territory will be at the mercy of the desert’s power. Every man will be subject to the laws of the sand.

Everyone. Even them.

“How do you know this guy is from Little Congo; do you know him?”

It is Chrysler who has just spoken; he is talking to Leo MacMillan, the BlackSky renter, and he has been controlling the conversation all along.

They are here, all four of them—Yuri, Chrysler, Pluto Saint-Clair, and the Professor. Above them, the sky is deep gold. The southern horizon is filled with a wall resembling a million swarms of hornets flying in their direction. From here, they can see the entire city. To the southwest are the high black buttes of Carbon City. Yuri can still clearly discern the desert expanse of New Arizona, with its sparse dunes among the rocks, its thousands of makeshift houses gleaming like shells deposited by the tide.

They are here, all four of them, around Leo MacMillan.

Yuri contemplates the Professor, who has just gathered his things from one of the neighboring orange capsules.

They had a good amount of time to get to know one another—a few hours, this morning. He and Chrysler learned a lot. Much more than they expected.

But still not enough. Not quite enough. Just enough to convince them of the validity of what they already knew, and of the fact that they must lead the Professor directly to what he is seeking.

They must take him to Milan Djordjevic.

They must take him to the father of their secret.

“No, Mr. Campbell; I don’t know him, but he used to be a pimp in the northern part of the city. I frequented several of them, but they all look alike.”

“Can you describe him for us?”

The old man grimaces in disappointment. “I don’t see very well anymore; my optical implants aren’t operational, and my glasses only help a little.”

“Can you give us a description? Yes or no.”

“Well, he was dark—yes; black hair, very black. And a sort of beard, or maybe a mustache, I’m not sure ... he didn’t stay for more than a minute; I told you—”

“If you can’t see very well, what makes you say that he’s a pimp in Little Congo?”

The old man shifts from one foot to the other, hesitating. “It’s true, Mr. Campbell; I can’t see details, but I can make out the whole. He was wearing one of those 1970s orange suits. That’s a trademark of the pimps in Little Congo. I’m almost sure of it.”

“What else?”

“He drove a goddamned huge gasoline-powered red Buick from the turn of the century. An antique. The thing was sparkling clean. Like a Ferrari. Polished until it shone like a diamond. That’s the sort of detail that doesn’t go unnoticed in Junkville.”

Yuri says nothing; does not move at all; keeps his face totally impassive.

Always keep your distance, repeats Chrysler Campbell’s voice in his head.

A red Buick. A gasoline-powered “midsize” sedan from the turn of the century, just like the one he accidentally brushed this morning while driving at the bottom of the mesa. He’d better plan the right moment to tell Chrysler—and *only* Chrysler—about it.

“Okay, then,” Chrysler is saying at that moment. “Bright orange suit. Red Buick. That’s an excellent beginning. What did he say to you? What exactly did he ask you?”

“He asked me if the renter in Capsule 14 was at home. I said no.”

“That’s it?”

“No. He asked me if I knew when he was coming back. I said I didn’t. I asked him if he wanted to leave a message with me. He said no and turned right around. He got into his red Buick and drove away to the north. That’s how I know that—”

“All right, Mr. MacMillan. He asked for the renter in Capsule 14; is that what you just told us?”

Yuri sees Chrysler’s gaze flick for an instant to the man who just arrived, and who has already been scoped out by the local mafia. The man from Texas. The man who knows the father of Link de Nova. The man who had worked on the last, fatal update of the Metastructure.

The man who has brought chaos with him. The man who might, perhaps, be the means to recreate a World.

“Yes, Mr. Campbell. That’s what he asked me. In those words.”

“So he didn’t ask for a certain Mr. Untel, or just Untel?”

“No, sir. That would have been pointless anyway; I don’t know the man’s identity. Pluto asked me to keep it anonymous on the capsule-park register. He’s under Jack Black, and that’s the only name I know him by.”

The old man points his chin in the Professor’s direction.

Pluto had been very careful to ensure that the Professor’s anonymity would be preserved. Very astute of him, thinks Yuri.

Very astute. But not enough.

Not enough here in Junkville, where the tiniest fragment of information spreads as fast as sand at the heart of a storm.

Pluto was right to insist that the Professor move immediately, but it is already too late, he says to himself, watching the yellow-gray wave rise in the sky, looming over the Territory.

The wave will crash soon enough. It is both a sign and an event that will push them to take desperate measures.

He watches a tall black tornado growing atop one of Carbon City’s hills, just across from them. The wind is beginning to lash their faces, striking them with tiny, sharp, innumerable crystals of silica.

Chrysler continues his interrogation imperturbably. He continues to act, as is his habit, with the sangfroid of a machine. He has been well trained by this World, Yuri muses to himself. He might even be able to fight it, as if in an MMA ring.

“Did you notice any special details about him? I don’t know, a distinctive scar or some other mark?”

“Nothing except that fucking suit and his Buick ... but, wait—yes, in fact—the guy didn’t seem to be in very good shape.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hard to say. He looked feverish, and he was shivering. Looked like maybe one of his implants was breaking down. But that isn’t exactly uncommon these days, is it?”

Yuri gazes at the black mass of Carbon City, at the frozen image of the monumental advance guard that will soon rush in on the whole Territory.

“Do you have any idea of this man’s identity, other than the fact that he lives in Little Congo?”

“I know a few pimps there, I told you, that used to be on the Monolith Hills strip. They could probably tell you something.”

Yuri continues to stare at Carbon City’s inky peaks, but out of the corner of his eye he can perceive a typical change of frequency in his friend’s brain. It is their unique mutual brand of telepathy.

And he knows exactly what Chrysler is thinking, not least because he has arrived at the same conclusion himself, at the same time. At the same instant, in the same place.

If the BlackSky renter knows pimps in Little Congo, and if the man in the orange suit is really from that township, this connection might prove very useful as a source of firsthand information.

But that also means that Mr. Leo MacMillan probably talks to those pimps, too. And since all the pimps know one another, especially the ones in the same township, then everything Mr. MacMillan has just told them, as insignificant as it might seem, will have also reached the ears of the man who is looking for the Professor.

Yuri also understands that Chrysler is hesitant to deliver the death blow—to ask the old man straight out who he has told about the arrival of the man from Texas.

“What language did he speak?” Chrysler asks, hopelessly.

“He was from the south of the Territory, I’d say. A native English speaker for sure.”

The heights of Carbon City jut, black, into the exploding yellow sky.

Pure-black density. Waves of coal standing immobile against the undertow of the sandy tide.

Black, completely black. Huge pyramids slicing into the depths of this night that has fallen on the Earth.

So black. So utterly black.

No.

Except there.

Except there. On the summit just across from them, in the second of the staggered rows of peaks behind the burgeoning spiral of the micro-tornado. There, on that point that reaches as high as the mesa they are standing on.

A red spot.

Brilliant red.

Maintaining its shine even under a sky so filled with the dark clouds of the oncoming storm.

Bright red. Very bright.

Given the apparent distance, it is as big as a car.

He looks at Chrysler, careful not to let any emotion show on his face. He takes a breath and says, cold as ice:

“Chrysler, I’m going to check something in the truck.”

Chrysler throws a frigid but intense glance at Yuri. *He understands*, thinks Yuri to himself. *He understands that something has happened.*

Something that must be investigated at all possible speed.

The Schmidt & Bender binoculars are at least fifty years old, but they work fantastically. Thanks to Link de Nova, all their processors are operational; there are two day modes—full-light and half-light—and three night-vision modes. The laser range finder works as well. The binoculars are worth as much as a weapon.

A whole arsenal of weapons.

Which is exactly why they are in the truck, along with a cache of guns. Under the passenger seat in a hidey-hole made of an aluminum box, well concealed but easily extractable from their place of concealment. There is a

Sig Sauer P226, fifteen-shot and double-barreled. There is the Texan Taser Yuri uses quite often. And under the driver's seat, in a similar hiding place, there is the standard U.S. Army Beretta from the turn of the century that is Chrysler's weapon of choice, as well as his electric billy club and his own Taser. The two automatic pistols use nine-millimeter bullets—the same ammunition, and thus interchangeable. They are sturdy, precise, and very reliable weapons. The kind of weapons that were dismissed as antiques before the Fall, during the era of hyperkinetic micromunitions and magnetic propulsion rifles. Today, these are practically weapons of mass destruction. Not to mention the slide-action, 12-caliber, nine-round Mossberg 590 machine gun and the big-game-hunting shotgun, both also using the same type of bullets, and the Winchester SX3 Composite semiautomatic, fitted with a self-loading system, that are stashed beneath the pickup's narrow backseat.

And, of course, the binoculars.

The lenses are in light-dark mode; codes scroll in a saraband of letters and numbers across the periphery of the vision field.

The red spot swims into focus.

It is indeed a car. A Buick. And there is a man inside it, in the driver's seat.

And the man inside the red Buick is holding an oblong object to one of his eyes.

An object he is pointing in their direction.

Yuri zooms in farther, then refocuses.

The man in the Buick certainly fits the BlackSky renter's description. The orange suit looks dirty beige in the faint light, but it is topped by a head of very black, oily-looking hair. He can even see the black beard ringing the man's mouth.

He recognizes the man from the night before; they crossed paths on the way to Autostrada. He recognizes the car perfectly, down to the scrape his Kawasaki left on its rear fender when they narrowly avoided a serious collision.

But the man is no longer trembling convulsively; he doesn't look bad at all. Between the time when Yuri and the renter encountered him and now, he has changed a lot. One of those rare temporary remissions, maybe ...

And then there is the object the man is holding.

Holding up to his right eye, and pointing in their direction.

A telescope. One of those ancient naval telescopes Yuri saw once as part of a lot in Vortex Townships. Is it one of those very devices that is now in the hands of the man in the red Buick?

The man who is spying on them.

The man who can, like them, watch from far away.

* * *

The smoked anti-UV windows of the Ford F-350 should adequately mask him from the man's view.

The man can see long distances with his telescope, surely, but he has neither Schmidt & Bender binoculars nor the military-origin radiation-absorption filters that are installed on their truck, which was customized by Chrysler's father, a former army officer and security specialist who had then done the same sort of work for the cosmodrome authorities.

He can see from far away, but Yuri can see close-up. Very close-up. Better than if he were sitting next to the man. And Yuri is invisible to the man with the telescope.

He can observe the other man, but the other man can't observe him. It is a fundamental Special Forces rule from the last century, as Chrysler Campbell told him one day: *To see, you must not be seen.*

Of course, the man probably got a glimpse of him as he was getting into the truck, but after that Yuri had disappeared from his field of vision, cocooned in a sarcophagus of metal and Plexiglas, safe from the prying eyes of men in the outside world.

Even men equipped with naval telescopes.

Even men driving sparkling turn-of-the-century Buicks.

Even men who consider themselves kings of the city.

"I need to know the truth, Pluto," Campbell says. "I need to know exactly what you told that old bastard of a renter, Mr. MacMillan, who's buddies with all the pimps in Little Congo."

All four of them are in the truck, heading toward Aircrash Circle—the *first point of orbital rendezvous*, as Chrysler calls it.

They are just crossing the northern city limits on one of the rare bridges still in use that crosses the old highway from west of Autostrada. The towers of Omega Blocks rise up to their right, overlooking dry savannas

and scrubby balls of tumbleweed. Behind them, in the Ford's taillights, Yuri can see the sky transforming into a rumbling, fiery, black and gray and yellow mass.

On the tarmac of Block 8 is the depressing sight of the Vortex Townships Triad at work. But a bit farther away, in Block 14 or 16, he can make out the green uniforms of the Snake Zone Triad busy with activities of their own. In Junkville, for the Triads as for most of the economic players, the rules are simple—to each its own township and private property—but for the rest, in the city's common areas and the rest of the Territory, it all boils down to the law of “first come, first served.” It looks like Slim Dubois has competition. And it can only grow. Death has many allies in this world. Above all those who have already been condemned to die.

Pluto is hunched sullenly in a corner of the backseat next to Professor Zarkovsky, who stares out the window at the sand-lashed, windswept landscape.

“I think I fucked up,” Pluto says finally. “I talked to him two or three times about my ‘friend from Texas.’ First to reserve a capsule, and then I don’t remember why. Wait, yes I do—I had just received a message from the Professor, from Ohio. I was really excited, and I mentioned ‘my friend the Professor.’”

“Is that all?”

“No. That’s when I really screwed up. He asked me a couple of harmless questions.”

“There’s no such thing as a harmless question in Junkville,” Chrysler snaps.

“I *know* that,” retorts Pluto Saint-Clair, piqued. “So he asked me two or three questions. Where my friend was from, why he was coming, who he was. And the worst part is that I answered him.”

Chrysler’s silence might as well be a string of curses. Finally, he speaks. “And you answered him precisely, I hope? Gave him all the details?” His voice is like ice.

“No, but I did mention the ’56 Nobel Prize, and the fact that the Professor worked on the last version of the Metastructure. I realized my mistake too late.”

There is another brief silence, but they can almost hear the swear words erupting from Chrysler Campbell’s tightly closed lips.

“And you live in Junkville, Pluto? I hope you realize that you’ve broken the cardinal rule of any security system.”

Pluto doesn’t answer. It’s as clear to him as it is to the rest of them.

As they cross the semiarid plains stretching north of Omega Blocks, Yuri concentrates for a moment on the vast spaces covered with the Territory’s neoecological vegetation, now predominantly weeds of all kinds: prickly whitish phragmites; Canadian dogwood whose tough branches look like bunches of charred veins; various types of thistles recognizable by the colors of their flowers and the precise structures of their serrated petals—Flodman’s thistles, Russian thistles, field thistles, marsh thistles, prairie thistles, Canadian thistles, nonfeathery thistles, unbent thistles, common thistles. Greenish carnivorous ambrosia and mugwort, whose aggressive pollen causes dermatitis and hay fever; false quillwort, with its alternating wavy and sharp-edged leaves, so brilliantly green they appear lacquered, covered with forked bristles whose narrow, branching stalks end in dense bunches of flowers with yellow petals and orange seeds; young stems of Canadian goldenrod with their three-pointed leaves, spreaders of tormenting allergies, whose inflorescence forms pyramidal clouds of intense yellow-green; the high, dense columns of various types of euphorbia, whose bushy branches reach up to three feet in height; clumps of chick-weed and starflowers whose stems grow in tangled knots while their blossom-filled branches bear compact bunches of whitish berries; the purple-streaked branches and small white flowers of the highly poisonous water hemlock; *Centaurea pratensis*—meadow knapweed—with its spiny purplish blue flowers; blackberry brambles with long bearded stems; wild roses and hawthorn with small pink-and-white blossoms; poison sumac with its skin-irritating secretions; Saint-John’s-wort, its towering sturdy stalks topped with bunches of bright yellow flowers; milkweeds with tall, spiny stems and purplish blossoms; viperines with large blue-and-violet flowers and bristly leaves like fangs; various bindweeds whose green tendrils wind like snakes around neighboring plants or the trunks of accessible trees while their cardioid leaves and small short-stemmed flowers grow in wispy bunches at the end of their multibranched stalks and cover the ground with a carpet of rough growth. All the soil thus populated by hardy and sometimes toxic plants, this parasitic vegetation of neonature, is often swept

by errant, barbed-wire-like tumbleweeds and serves as a natural nest for colonies of wasps and hornets, mosquitoes and black flies, horseflies, dragonflies, deerflies, army ants, termites, tarantulas, huge garden spiders and enormous centipedes, worms and slugs—an entire armada of crawling and flying insects. It is the most beautiful ecology in the world, the deadliest, the most vibrant.

Yuri turns again in his seat to look out the rear window at the wide, dusty road that has become the principal north-south route in the Territory during the past twelve years of intensely speeded-up desertification. He glances at the large exterior rearview mirror.

“Chrysler,” he says in his mildest tone, “I think it would be a good idea for us to take our ‘special route.’”

Campbell hasn’t spoken for long moments, maintaining his habitual, calmly ironic smile in the face of the world’s chaos. He and Yuri might as well be discussing the territory’s applied weather, the storm beginning to break over Junkville. “The code-red route, Yuri?” he asks, as if inquiring about the location of some obscure intersection.

“Red. Completely red,” Yuri replies, keeping his voice casual.

Still, he notices an odd shiver run through his friend’s body, and knows that his friend has not failed to take the hint, even if he is unaware of anything more specific than that.

Row 299. They are somewhere near Neon Park now, not far from the shores of Lake Champlain. The “code red” special route is tortuous. It runs northeast of Deadlink, then dips southeast toward Aircrash Circle, passing through a desolate landscape of naked rocks and clumps of vegetation surviving with difficulty in the midst of a bare steppe scattered with a few acres of wild grass and thorny perennials, vestiges of what was once, before the Fall, lush subtropical flora.

Now it has all been subjugated by the desert. The desert that has already forced men to adapt their lives to its dictates.

“The storm must be over Junkville by now. We can go to yellow alert,” observes Yuri.

“Yes. We’ll take the diagonal roads and get back to the north-south route. We need to catch the storm.”

Yuri glances at Chrysler out of the corner of his eye. Yes. His friend knows that the man in the red car, who has been following them since Junkville, was forced to execute a speedy turnaround in order to avoid getting lost in some barren part of the Territory. It has been more than ten minutes since Yuri saw the red spot in the rearview mirror or the window, appearing and disappearing in the treacherous terrain.

They use the “special route” to lose possible pursuers in the labyrinth of rows and roads he and Chrysler know by heart, to exhaust their fuel supplies and their patience, and to make it impossible for them to follow their prey.

As a passive, defensive weapon, it has proved its usefulness more than once.

By the time Chrysler pulls the truck into the aluminum shelter his father built years ago, the wind is gusting at almost a hundred kilometers per hour. Chrysler takes a portable biophosphorescent lantern from the wall and switches it on, filling the metal shed with yellowish light.

From a tin armoire, he takes a small steel ladder equipped with a pneumatic jack and automated rollers. Then, opening a trapdoor at his feet, he lowers the ladder slowly into the ground.

The lantern’s yellow light casts long, wavering shadows on the aluminum walls and titanium-composite beams of the underground structure. Chrysler’s father was always a prudent man—one might even say paranoid. It was he who built the little hut with its underground passage, he who stockpiled the weapons here that Chrysler has been hoarding since his childhood to go along with the Ruger Mini-14 rifle hidden in the main house; there is the SAR-7 assault rifle from the turn of the century, the Californian copy of the redoubtable Russian army AK-47, the German-made H&K MP5 tommy gun, the nine-millimeter automatic pistol, the hands-free Remington semiautomatic shotgun, and the 7615 patrol air rifle once used by police tactical units with a magazine copied from that of an AR-15, capable of ten or twelve rounds and fitted with a small Nikon scope, housed in a .223 Remington. There are also two French-made belts of defensive shattering grenades, several blinding grenades made in China, and a bunch of flash missiles and smoke bombs of various origins. There are the two military antiques in perfect working order: a Waffen-SS Luger

P08 and a 1945 Russian Tokarev, which may well have faced off against each other during the Battle of Berlin. And in addition to all this, there are enough munitions to support a weeks-long siege, safely packed in their fir boxes and long hidden in this subterranean crawl space. A veritable arsenal. One day Chrysler had told Yuri, only half joking, that the two of them alone could probably compete with the arms traffickers at Powder Station.

“They’ve been in the shit since the First Fall,” he had said, “with their fucking magnetic rifles and stores of ‘intelligent’ micromunitions.”

Evidently his father, though he worked for the cosmodrome, had had very little trust in the technological innovations of the 2010s and 2020s.

Evidently he hadn’t believed it could last.

The world had proved him right. And in so doing, it had consigned him to the grave.

The four men climb down into the dark, narrow depths of the subterranean passage, Yuri first, Chrysler last.

The storm howls more fiercely every minute. Jets of sand strike the walls in a long and deafening barrage. Less-solid structures sway periodically in the gale-force wind. Noises of all sorts—cracks, creaks, whistles, scratches—assault their ears continuously as they gather in the tiny single-room space.

Yuri can see nothing more out the plastic-composite fuselage windows than a dark cloud of particles dancing with crazily kinetic energy. It must be what an electromagnetic storm in space is like, he muses to himself, thinking—he doesn’t know why—of the sky obscured by the passing storm, but also by the End of the World. Thinking of the sky, cut off from the Earth, and of the several hundred thousand men and women still living in the Ring. Living in freedom. With their machines.

For decades, the Territory provided a sort of exit door to anyone and everyone who wished to try living without the totalitarian presence of the Metastructure, in the Orbital Ring. Just before the Fall, more than a million people were living in the Ring, but nine-tenths of them were lowly temporary workers or seasonal technical specialists, or simply travelers in transit. The Machine-World had tolerated the Ring’s presence while keeping a tight hold on research funds for its expansion and for space exploration (or so Chrysler Campbell says his father told him). During the Fall, most of the temporary workers managed to make it back to Earth in spite of numerous accidents. They soon regretted their success.

The desert that has come now to threaten the Territory with its absolutely undeniable physical presence is like a meteorological copy of the *thing* that is killing machines and men. The desert is acting like a geophysical clone of the Post-Machine.

Together, the two phenomena might be able to destroy the world—but is it possible that their efforts are concentrated on the annihilation of the Territory?

On the annihilation of Gabriel Link de Nova, and the small circle of people who have gathered around him in a last protective stand?

Is the desert, to some degree, part of the *thing*'s plan?

It is at once inconceivable and terribly, utterly logical.

12 > GANG OF FOUR

Four men. A makeshift shelter. A sandstorm.

Four men. A territory. A nameless, borderless *thing*.

Four men. A secret. A young man at the heart of that secret.

Four men. Their secrets. Their hopes, their dreams, their past, their present, their future.

And the wind that is striking and shaking everything in this world.

And the sand that cuts and tears anything onto which the wind hurls it.

And the shrieking black-and-purple sky, thundering, roaring like thousands of invisible rotors.

Only the silence intrudes. Chrysler makes tea in his samovar. Pluto Saint-Clair has settled in an armchair in the southwest corner of the Combi-Cube, where a portion of the A380's fuselage has been soldered.

The Professor sits in an antique leather armchair almost a century old, not far from the small athletic-training area. Yuri is in that part of the single room that is kept for his particular use, near the entry door taken from the crashed Airbus, furnished with his camp bed, a rotating office chair, and the analytic materials in their locked metal boxes.

When Pluto Saint-Clair opened the door of his Combi-Cube to them this morning in Midnight Oil, Yuri and Chrysler had greeted him with well-rehearsed, calm smiles firmly in place on their faces.

"The Professor is here. He's waiting for you."

"I would hope so. We didn't get up at the crack of dawn so we could watch the sunrise," Chrysler had retorted.

"I'll explain everything. We need to move the Professor off BlackSky Ridge as fast as possible, but first we should talk. Come in."

Yuri had followed Chrysler into Pluto Saint-Clair's large one-room dwelling. They were there. The zero hour. The moment of truth. Meeting, finally, this man from Texas who participated in the development of the Metastructure.

Both Yuri and Chrysler knew—and each was aware of the other’s knowledge—that they were establishing a connection between the origin and the end, between the old man who designed the last version of the Machine-World on one hand, and the young man who heals machines, bionic implants, and modified organisms on the other. The young man with the guitar, who alone seems able to resist the entity born of the very death of the Professor’s Metamachine.

“Paul Zarkovsky,” Pluto introduced the man, a bit awkwardly. The three men faced one another in the center of the room.

“Chrysler Campbell. This is my associate, Yuri McCoy. We’re very happy to meet you, Professor Zarkovsky,” the Aircrash Circle trafficker said smoothly.

The four of them had then sat down, and long seconds of silence passed during which Yuri and Chrysler calmly—that is, with all sensors in high gear—contemplated the man that Pluto Saint-Clair had been waiting months for, the man who, perhaps, in association with Link de Nova, might be able to vanquish the *thing* and its second mutation, the horror transforming men into modems and leaving nothing of them but a vast catalogue of binary-language organs.

They had stayed that way, unmoving, in Pluto’s Combi-Cube, just as they now sit immobile around the steaming tea that Campbell has just set down on his camping table—prudently welded to the floor of the hybrid cabin—as the storm reaches its maximum ferocity outside. The anemometer is attached to the roof, but Chrysler has managed to cobble together a functional extension reaching inside the Combi-Cube, a small electromechanical dial with teetering numbers that allows him to read with precision the wind speeds in real time.

“One hundred seventeen kilometers an hour. It’s stabilizing,” he says, after consulting the device.

He says nothing more. The silence takes over again, as does the din of the storm.

A similar silence fell during the first seconds of their meeting that morning in Pluto Saint-Clair’s home.

Chrysler had regarded the Professor with his usual cold intensity.

He was going to take his usual no-anesthetic approach, Yuri thought.

“Okay. I think nobody here wants to lose any more time than necessary. So I’ll get right to the point, Mr. Zarkovsky.”

“That was my purpose in coming here as well, Mr. Campbell.”

“But you haven’t yet achieved your purpose, as far as I can tell. And that’s precisely why we’re here. Let’s lay all our cards out on the table. We know about the library coming from Italy, and we’ve agreed to ensure its safety while it’s in Quebec—under certain conditions, of course, that we’ll get to later. But what’s more important, especially here in the Territory, is that you need information. And it so happens that we do, too.”

“Are you talking about an exchange? A ‘deal’? Is that it?”

“No, Professor Zarkovsky. Not exactly; not in the sense that you mean it.”

“In what sense, then?”

“It’s simple, as you’ll see. First, you’re going to tell us everything we need to hear, so that we know precisely what we can *tell* you.”

“That doesn’t sound very fair to me,” Pluto Saint-Clair had remarked.

“There’s only one fair thing in this world, Pluto, and that’s death. Which is becoming the world as we speak. Total equality from cradle to grave, which will soon be the same thing. So spare me your humanist couplets, please.”

“In any case, I don’t think I really have a choice,” the Professor said fatalistically, shooting Chrysler a blank gaze.

“You’re wrong, Mr. Zarkovsky. There is always a choice. Certainly between living and dying; perhaps less today than yesterday, but also the choice between betrayal and loyalty, between safety and risk, between defending yourself and letting yourself bleed. The choice between dying for nothing or dying for a reason.”

“Very well,” said the Professor, with a sigh. “What do you want to know?”

“I told you. It’s very simple. Everything. We want to know *everything*.”

The Professor drew in a long breath and closed his eyes for a few moments, leaning heavily against the back of his chair.

“Everything” is obviously going to be a whole lot, Yuri had said to himself.

Chrysler knew exactly what he wanted to know, and in what order he wanted to know it. He had written out a sort of preliminary list, using the information Pluto and Yuri already had. Now he wanted to put names and places on the paper, too, as well as the relationships between them.

At the same time, there was the Territory of Grand Junction—the reality, the place that was their ally, and there was the map of this territory. But the map was incomplete. Specifically, it was lacking the “place of origin” of the true storm, the invisible one, the silent one, the one darkening not only the sky but the Earth itself as well. It was lacking exactly what the Professor from southern Texas had come to bring them. The map of the Invisible.

“You’ll begin by telling us about your true duties within the organization that updated the Metamachine. You’ll tell us about this ‘final version’ you helped design.”

Chrysler had delineated, in a few words, the first phase of the operation. It was a commandment pronounced without the slightest apparent authority—Yuri knew his acolyte well. He was simply stating the request as fact, as if it had already been fulfilled.

So the Professor began recounting the final days of the Metastructure, the final days of the World-Machine. The final days of the Human Empire.

“At the end of the 2040s, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, the Metastructure put out an international call for bids for an overall ‘update.’ Of course, it would be supervising the work, the prehiring selections, the final selections, et cetera. But the system engineers worked in cooperation with it in real time. They modified entire sections of the Metaorganism in simulation processors and the Metastructure chose, oriented, decided—”

“It updated itself using the humans in its service?”

“Yes, exactly. But by 2050, the first team hadn’t made much real progress, so the Metastructure dissolved it and put out a new call for bids, for a second project. I was hired at the beginning of ’51. I had just come back from spending a long time in orbit working for an Australian biotech firm. The new team slaved away like a band of the damned. In two years we made more progress than the previous guys, but—I don’t know—the Metastructure wasn’t really satisfied. Still just quantitative changes, it said. It wanted a qualitative leap. It wanted to be *better*, it said. During the holiday season at the end of ’52, the idea came to me little by little, and in the spring of the following year I proposed a new line of study. It was accepted by the Metastructure.”

“That was the qualitative leap it had been waiting for.”

“Yes. For once, I hadn’t relied on my pure scientific knowledge. Genetics, biochemistry, neurocybernetics, et cetera.”

“On what, then?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“You have no idea how many fairy tales I’ve ended up believing in the last twelve years.”

“I didn’t rely on fairy tales, my dear sir, but on old philosophical works. Leibniz, especially, but also on some ancient patristic texts.”

“Patristic?”

“The Church Fathers. ‘Christian’ philosophy, if you will, dating from before the Renaissance.”

“Ah—and what did this provide?”

“The final version of the Metastructure. The qualitative leap it was seeking. And that motivated it to nominate us—the whole laboratory team—for the Nobel Prize. We carried out many experiments in 2055; then, on April 4, 2056, the Metastructure’s twenty-ninth anniversary, we set the entire updating process in motion in a single night. It was a real success.”

“In view of what came later, the word *success* seems a little euphemistic to me,” says Chrysler dryly.

“On that night, Mr. Campbell, the operation was a total success. It was around two months later, as the laboratory was being dismantled, that we received an urgent message from the Global Governance Bureau. The Metastructure wanted to renew our contract, for at least a year. But no one knew why.”

“Except you, I imagine.”

“We were brought into the loop very quickly, as a matter of fact. The Metastructure was starting to have problems. Phenomena unknown up to that point were developing inside it. It didn’t understand, and it needed us. We got to work. Nonstop. Day and night, for months and months.”

“And?”

“And we didn’t find anything. Around October ’56, the phenomena increased. We were seeing them several times a week, but we still didn’t understand what was happening; at least, we couldn’t determine the cause.”

“What kinds of problems were they?”

“Many kinds. First, the Metastructure alerted us that an unknown force was attacking it, or preparing to attack it. We tested its pseudocortical

circuits; there were no paranoid tendencies. Then we determined that the parasitic phenomena affecting it were coming from the uncontrolled emission of photons in its own genetic structure. The emissions kept increasing in intensity and we were still unable to locate their source. Finally we realized that the update carried out according to my design might very probably be at the origin of our problems. It was a catastrophe.”

“Why? I don’t mean to ask why it was a catastrophe, but why was your update the source of the problems?”

“We weren’t sure. We didn’t have any formal proof, just suppositions. It had to do with my basic idea. An idea that utterly completed the Metastructure’s mission—really, all I had done was to finalize the Megamachine’s ontological project. I gave it the means to be truly, 100 percent, what it was. I assured its destiny, in a way, and that’s exactly what happened.”

“What was this update, Professor?”

“It was what the Metastructure wanted to be but didn’t know how. I gave it the solution. But the solution led to an even larger problem.”

“What did it want to be?”

“It wanted to be itself. I told you. It wanted a body, and it wanted a World. But since the World was its ‘body,’ if it really desired to be incarnated in a real, *individuated body*, it would have to lose the World, and thus ‘de-create’ it. And if it wanted a World, it would have to ‘de-create’ bodies. That’s what I told it. It was part of the fundamental makeup of its double constraint. What the ‘Language-World’ metaprogram was aiming to transcend.”

“You might say it did both.”

“Exactly. All it could do was vacillate constantly between the two poles of de-creation, without ever physically managing to start a process of individuation.”

“But the bizarre thing is that its failure meant our loss.”

“That is the real paradox of this entity. The Metastructure enslaved mankind, yet its disappearance is leading to ultimate slavery. In self-destructing, it was able to create the world it wanted.”

“A desert?”

“Worse than the desert itself. The desert is only a form of the *thing*.”

“Then what?”

“A Camp, Mr. Campbell. A Camp-World. A global concentration camp.”

Stretched out near the Airbus emergency-exit hatch that serves as the entry door in Chrysler's Combi-Cube, Yuri listens to the sandstorm scour the world outside, the Territory, the little cabin in Aircrash Circle. He remembers the night-desert that fell over them with Professor Zarkovsky's last words, and the anguish that had turned to calm serenity as he accepted the terrible intrusion of the truth. A Camp-World. A planetary concentration camp. A world where life has no more value than sand, and death no more than the value of a number.

He and Campbell had exchanged a brief glance during that moment, as Pluto faded into silence, a glance of shared new awareness of this unknowable truth they had yet guessed. Then Chrysler resumed his interrogation as if nothing had happened.

"Other than the fact that your friend lives in the Territory, why Grand Junction, Professor?"

Yuri had instantly understood that Chrysler had detected the existence of a secret, as he often did. He was like a human computer, with digitally precise intuition; he fit right into the Territory's singularly Darwinist system.

"The Metastructure has had ... particular relations with the Territory of Grand Junction for a long time," Zarkovsky had replied.

Yuri had immediately seized on two salient facts.

One: neither he nor Campbell had expressed the slightest emotion after Professor Zarkovsky's astonishing assertion, as professional discipline demanded.

Two: Pluto Saint-Clair had blinked. He had even given a reflexive shudder, as he often did when hit with a sudden surge of adrenaline.

"Explain," Chrysler said simply.

"First, remember the historical conditions under which the Metastructure came into being: it was anxious to stop the Second War of American Secession, like all the other conflicts born of the Grand Jihad."

"So?"

"So, the Mohawk Territory of Grand Junction was spared by this conflict, just as it avoided the civil problems in Canada. Because of its aerospace business, the Territory was financially independent, but it profited greatly from UHU subsidies it received for the services it provided."

"Frankly, Professor, this isn't any big news to us. We were born in Grand Junction."

“I’m just trying to give you some context. I was getting to the important part. Details that I only learned about later—too late, maybe. Here they are: in return for its loyalty, the Territory became one of the Metastructure’s ‘favorites,’ along with other places of the same type around the globe. So during the April ’56 update, Grand Junction, like the other favorites, was placed in the first line, the first wave, if you will, with each wave following another and getting larger and larger, after triple verifications. It was only when this guy from Corpus Christi said the words *Grand Junction* that it came to me, and that I understood I had to get there as soon as possible.”

Yuri saw that Pluto Saint-Clair’s face had gone dead white, and he was shuffling his feet nervously.

That’s called fear, Yuri had thought.

“What happened just before the Fall? How did the Metastructure’s last moments play out?”

“Starting in ’57, the problems sort of leveled out. Nothing we tried worked. The photonic emissions continued to increase, and the Metastructure talked constantly about this danger that was hanging over its head—and our heads. One day, I remember, it said to us: ‘I think the problem of these uncontrolled photonic emissions shows that it is by light that I will be destroyed.’

“So we programmed millions of antiviral routines capable of protecting the Metastructure from any photoelectric, laser, maser, ultraviolet, gamma-ray, or neutron emission attack. Around September ’57, one month before the Fall, the Metastructure warned us that the Final Cycle had just begun. Forces coalesced, the forces of the ‘Uncreated Light’—those were the very words it used—arrived on Earth to destroy it. The photonic emissions, which were sporadic, had now become virtually continuous. Then, on October 4 ...”

“How did the Fall manifest itself for you in the laboratory?”

“It might surprise you, but we were plunged into a darkness blacker than most other humans experienced. Since the machine had no real material existence to speak of, well, the laboratory wasn’t really based anywhere. It brought together groups of researchers in all disciplines and from all the governance bureaus working in a network at the very heart of the

Metastructure. When its death happened on that same day, we were the first ones affected. All our machines broke down instantly. Some of our researchers died during the first few hours. We have never been able to understand what happened. Only one of us, one of my assistants, using a metaprogram of his own design, was able to wrench a few pieces of information out of the nothingness.”

“What information?”

“Some ‘hot points,’ if you will. Localized points where the photonic emissions completely overwhelmed the Metastructure in the first instants, or nearly. We were able to register the phenomenon for an hour or two; then the last systems gave out.”

“What hot points?”

“Many of them. Dozens. All over the world. They didn’t stop multiplying. It was like a global epizootic. There were some in North America, obviously.”

“Here in the Northeast?”

“The American Northeast, actually. New York and your Territory, but also Canada. And in Chile, Argentina, East Africa, central Asia, southern Russia, eastern Asia, China, New Zealand ... I could go on and on.”

“Did it correspond to your successive waves during the update?”

“No. Not at all. It seemed completely random to us at the time, though we hadn’t been able to record the first fifteen or twenty minutes of the phenomenon, the time it took for my young assistant’s metaprogram to initialize.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuri had perceived a tiny movement from Pluto Saint-Clair. A tensing. The repression of a shudder. A minute shock. Almost nothing.

A small nothing that the Professor had said without realizing its importance. A small nothing that Pluto was hiding from all of them. Just as they were keeping an essential fact from him. Just as the Professor had undoubtedly not told them everything he knew.

Four men. Four secrets. A shelter on the brink of an abyss. A storm serving as the advance guard for the desert. Four men still disunited against a terribly monolithic World.

“It was around the end of ’56 that I began to look at the problem from another angle. Until then, since June, we’d been looking for what didn’t work in our update, and we hadn’t found anything. I told myself that maybe we should look in what *had* worked. Maybe the cause of the phenomenon would be there, in something that had worked *too well*, with consequences we didn’t expect. So I searched for weeks and weeks—three months, at least—reprofiling and refiguring all my data. One day it became as plain as the nose on my face. I had had the solution in front of my eyes since the beginning, because I was the one that had supervised that entire part of the operation.”

“Your World program, was that it?”

“Yes. But understand this: the Metamachine wasn’t conscious in the common sense of the word, and yet it was more than just a computer program. It was alive, in its own way. Like all living organisms, it needed a real world in order to evolve, even just to survive. That is what I created for it. Or, more exactly, my ‘Language-World’ metaprogram acted so as to make it understand the fact that it is language that creates worlds—that creates them and destroys them at the same time. It was at that moment—around April ’57—one year after the general swing toward the new operating system, that I began to think I might have made a mistake. I didn’t know what the mistake was exactly, but I sensed something. I tried to do very specific research, but a lot of databases had been shut down for years or even decades. That’s when I noticed that the majority of scientific innovation had ceased shortly after the Metastructure came into being, in the 2030s. It wasn’t really a secret anymore for anyone in our field, but we chalked it up as another of the many problems the Machine-World had to handle simultaneously—getting huge climatic changes and depopulation issues under control; the general reorganization of global society, health safety, pacification or freezing of most of the major conflicts in North America, central Asia, and the Indian Ocean; restarting world economic activity, et cetera. For us, the implementation of the update at the end of the 2040s—when the first version had fully proven its capabilities despite a few pockets of resistance in some geopolitical areas, particularly in southern Europe—the update, I realized, proved that the Machine-World was functioning perfectly, and that after it was restored to working order it would be able to complete the unification of the globe and to relaunch a vast program of multidisciplinary scientific research of worldwide

importance. On that day, I remember, I began to ask myself questions. I tried, unsuccessfully, to establish pertinent axes of research—especially in genetics, when, a little later, during the summer, I inquired about the problem directly to the Metastructure. Why did you, I asked, slow down—even stop—so much promising research in strategic areas like quantum physics, speculative genetics, neuropsychiatry, non-Aristotelian mathematics, anthropology, and cosmogony? Do you know what it said to me in return? ‘I alone will now be the judge of what research axes are pertinent for the survival of Humanity, meaning myself.’ Why, I asked, have you shut down all these databases from the early part of the century concerning the emission of biophotons by DNA? Its answer was, ‘You’ve figured that out, have you? I’ll tell you; I will never make this data available except to someone whose tenacity, loyalty, and scientific objectivity have led them precisely to it.’ Then I asked it, do you think I will be able to do that? ‘You are already doing it,’ it answered. And it gave me access to all that data.”

“And then?”

“It was too late. By the time I had even a vague idea of what we were confronted with, the Cataclysm of October fourth had arrived.”

A question was burning on Yuri’s lips like pure alcohol. He hoped Chrysler would not lose sight of the tiny bit of essential information contained in Professor Zarkovsky’s tale. And, as always, Chrysler proved that he would never miss such a critical detail.

“You mentioned a ‘Language-World’ update, is that right? You taught the Metastructure that it is language that creates and destroys worlds. Do I understand that correctly?”

“Exactly, Mr. Campbell. I still don’t know why, but there was a close link between those emissions of light and a multitude of phenomena that appeared at that time. The moment when my colleagues and I began to speak of *devolution*. Evolution in reverse. But not in the sense of reversed linear chronology. This is a much more complex phenomenon that we might compare to a ‘folding over’; the evolutionary dynamic turns back on itself, passes back by itself again and again, crosses itself, takes itself apart, mingles with its own past, becomes a sort of matter in constant hybridization.”

“Could language become matter?”

“I don’t know yet. One of the strangest things the Metastructure told us before its death was the feeling it had of ‘going backward.’ It said, ‘I think the alarm signals I told you about a year ago came from the future, from my future. From the day of my own disappearance, marking a stopping point, and I think they came back through time to warn me, or perhaps to condemn me. I don’t know what it means, but I know the laboratory’s ‘Language-World’ update made this transmutation possible. And do not ask what my disappearance will be like, because machine, world, and metaconscience, I am meant to be virtually immortal.’”

“Well, we must admit that, in a sense, it is,” Chrysler had said. “Even, and especially, in death.”

13 > THE PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN

The storm lasts until late in the night, linking the night-desert with the desert-night taking possession of the world. The sand and wind whirl and shriek without stopping for hours. Shortly after dusk, Campbell hears it begin to calm a bit; at regular intervals he reads aloud the number displayed on his anemometer's counter. It is past midnight when silence finally descends on the Territory.

Utter, deathlike silence. No longer even the slightest whisper of the wind or the tiniest noise of plant or animal. It is a silence like the one that preceded the Great Noise of Creation, Yuri says to himself. And a silence like the one that will follow it.

The four men haven't changed places for the entire day. The Professor fell asleep in his armchair for a few hours when the storm was at its strongest, waking the moment it ended.

Chrysler prepares a simple meal of nutritional rations and canned food scrounged in Neo Pepsico, Junkville's supermarket. They eat in silence amid the deafening silence that has replaced the din of climatic chaos, until Chrysler Campbell decides to resume the conversation they began that very morning.

There is still information to be collected, Yuri tells himself, but the Professor is also here to receive his share of the data. The exchange will happen soon. It will be in the ninth inning, when at some random moment Chrysler will have to drop a few crumbs. The important thing, Yuri knows, is to learn as much as possible before giving out the information that Zarkovsky is looking for. They have to exploit both his trust and their own power, however temporary. The Professor's entire memory must be drawn out. His entire confession. His entire crime.

In exchange for which they will open the doors of Heavy Metal Valley to him.

The Professor doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell against Campbell, and Pluto Saint-Clair won't be able to provide much recourse for him at all.

And the Professor is visibly aware of all this. He allows a bitter smile to curl his lips as Chrysler nonchalantly picks up the thread of his interrogation as if only a few seconds have passed since he asked the last question.

"You were talking about Christian Scholasticism this morning. You told us it contributed greatly to the design of your update. I need to know more."

Yuri is flabbergasted. As always, Chrysler's surprise attacks come when they are least expected.

"What do you know about the major Christian heresies of the early centuries? What do you really know about what you call Scholasticism? Do the names of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Bonaventure, Saint Irene, Saint Bernard, Duns Scotus, Jean Cassien, or Nicolas de Cues mean anything to any of you?"

Zarkovsky has a point, Yuri thinks. A serious point. Chrysler is venturing into unexplored terrain. And neither he nor Pluto will be able to help Campbell here. He ventured into unknown territory—first mistake—and alone—second mistake. But this time, Chrysler proves that on occasion, to conquer, you can't worry about your adversary's maneuvers. You have to persist, to hang on, to cede nothing. Go in headfirst. Destroy everything in your way.

"You can give us a theology lesson later, Professor. What I want to know is if you were in contact with Christian communities—here in America or in Europe, it doesn't matter—before and after the Fall of the Metastructure. And I want to know what these Christian communities have to say about what is on its way. I also want to know if you and your Balkan friend are of the same opinion on this subject, and if he helped you, and how, in designing your program. I'll take a refresher course on Saint Thomas Aquinas and the others one of these days, I promise."

"Too bad," returns the Professor. "You're right about one thing, and wrong about all the others."

"I can't be right or wrong yet, because all I've done is ask you questions."

"Questions can be wrong, too. Especially these days."

“So give me the answers that are the right ones.”

For the first time, Yuri senses a bit of defensiveness in his partner's voice. Maybe the Professor has it in him to cause even this human computer a few seconds of uncertainty. ...

“The main problem lies in what none of you know about this phenomenology of the invisible. You don't know what was begun by the Fall of the Metastructure in terms of an eschatological process.”

“Eschatological?”

The Professor doesn't need to give a sigh of resignation; they all hear it in their heads. Yes, Yuri says to himself. Paul Zarkovsky is a worthy match for Chrysler Campbell. Maybe the two of them will end up in a sort of tie game.

“You really don't know enough. I have no idea where to start. I mean it. What do you know of the Old or New Testaments? Or the Apocryphal writings? The Jewish pseudo-epigraphic texts? What do you know about Genesis, or the Apocalypse? Or the nature of the Holy Scriptures themselves?”

Then, after a good ten seconds of absolute, bothered silence: “I think the best thing, Mr. Campbell, would be for you to take me to my friend Milan Djordjevic. He is a doctor of theology and could undoubtedly explain things to you much better than I. Or, let's say, having both of us would make it much easier.”

Yuri and Chrysler exchange a glance of utter complicity. Yes. They are facing a time game. The time to deliver the goods has come. Chrysler held down his position until the very last possible moment. And there are secrets here that hide other secrets, which in turn ...

Both of them know the exact location of the Professor's Balkan friend. And now they will tell him.

But the Professor probably knows nothing about any of the Catholic communities, Reformed and Orthodox, that have gathered in HNV County. He is far from suspecting the exact nature of the “sanctuary.”

Nor does he know about the very important existence of his friend Djordjevic's son.

He is even unaware of the recent emergence of the “second mutation.”

On the other hand, and each of them has read it in the other's face, it is obvious that Pluto Saint-Clair is also hiding a secret. A secret that has something to do with the Fall. A secret he probably doesn't know what to

do with, but one that he undoubtedly hopes to sell one day at a very high price.

* * *

They are on the road at dawn. It's becoming a habit, thinks Yuri. Chrysler is at the wheel; each of them takes the same place as yesterday. Habits have a way of taking root; what remains of humanity strives to maintain its few pockets of resistance in the midst of the Post-Machine desert.

The transaction has been planned in several successive phases of approach. Campbell has told the Professor and Pluto Saint-Clair that in exchange for their information, they desire a reasonable share of the books that will soon arrive from Europe. The Professor was strongly opposed to this, but Campbell would hear nothing of it. It was Pluto Saint-Clair who had managed to convince him that the library contained nothing of much value in itself. "But Yuri said something about instruction manuals," Chrysler had said. Zarkovsky had laughed. Pluto had explained wearily that the library contained theoretical scientific and ancient Scholastic literature—nothing at all that would find buyers in the Territory. "So how do you propose to pay us?" Chrysler had asked. With a note of credit signed by Sheriff Langlois for a good store of munitions, to be presented to the Powder Station traffickers, and another for a hundred gallons of gasoline in Reservoir Can; would that do? They would begin escorting the merchandise as soon as it arrived in Quebec.

Yuri had thought immediately that the sheriff of HMTV wouldn't let anyone escort anything through his territory without his permission.

Campbell takes the rutted road toward Deadlink before turning north on the old Nexus Road, which runs, full of dust and light, toward the heights of Monolith Hills. A thin sliver of moon still gleams faintly in the cloudless sky like a mercury slipstream, curving amid emerald-tinted azure. There is no trace to be seen in the heavens of the previous day's storm—but here on Earth the sand has won even more terrain, creating new islands of sand scattered over the Territory or linking existing ones in a fresh expanse of dunes. No matter what type of landscape they pass through, they can see the desert infiltrating it like a virus.

Yuri and Chrysler know that the area around HMTV is honeycombed with military sensors of all kinds that Sheriff Wilbur Langlois scavenged after

the Fall, somewhere in the cosmodrome's technological-activity zones. The Valley of Heavy Metal is under high surveillance; everyone in the Territory knows it, Yuri and Chrysler better than most. HMTV is a fortress. No one enters it without a valid pass—that is, one signed by the sheriff himself.

Their arrival in the vicinity will be detected, signaled, and identified.

As soon as they cross the intersection with North Junction Road, an old street that descends through the hills toward the site of the cosmodrome, the alert will be sounded.

By the time they come into view of Xenon Ridge, the sheriff will have a patrol waiting for them.

Wilbur Langlois gazes fixedly at the young man he has just woken up with great difficulty as the sun sheds its first rays, pale as lily petals, over the Territory.

"Your friends are coming to visit you, Gabriel, and this time they aren't alone."

What does he mean, "not alone"? Gabriel Link de Nova asks himself, as he sits up in bed. If it is true that Yuri and Chrysler have brought one of their clients inside the very borders of Heavy Metal Valley, then they are breaking rule number one of the contract: never in HMTV; always outside the county, no matter where the actual business is taking place.

It seems inconceivable. Yuri and Chrysler would never imperil their secret association this way. They would never sabotage such a profitable venture.

"They're waiting at the south entry, near Bulldozer Park. You'll need to wake up your parents, young man."

"My parents? Why?"

"I'll explain things in good time. To your father. Tell them it's urgent. Your father will have to come with us. And tell them that's a legal order from the sheriff."

There are two sure things in the Territory, two intangible things, solid as a rock. Two things that are connected in a mysterious way that Link de Nova cannot quite understand; two things that are somehow one while being utterly irreconcilable at the same time. There is the Law of the World, the World of the Post-Machine, the World After the World, the World of the Encroaching Desert, ever stronger, farther, larger.

And there is the Law of this tiny Territory, constantly attacked by the desert, and in particular the Law of Heavy Metal Valley, the Law of the Sanctuary, the Law of the Fortress. The Law of Sheriff Wilbur Langlois.

Neither of which has even the tiniest sense of humor.

* * *

“I need to know the exact reason for your coming here, Professor. The fact that you are a friend of Milan Djordjevic means nothing. But let’s say that I have some a priori knowledge that isn’t completely unfavorable. Take advantage of it.”

The seven men are standing under the cone of orange light cast by a sodium streetlamp the sheriff took from one of the large tunnels under the city’s periphery. The sun is rising, its soft, oblique light mingling with the cold, hard, sharp illumination cast by the single naked bulb. Bulldozer Park sparkles in the combined glare of photons, electric light, and starlight. The morning looks like a never-ending twilight.

They form a somewhat-lopsided semicircle in the center of the tarmacked area where the community of HMV parks its construction vehicles—scrapers, bulldozers, tanker trucks, garbage trucks.

They are truly inside HMV, says Yuri to himself. This entryway to the Valley of Heavy Metal is a miniature version of the city itself: its layout, its architecture, its presence, and especially its spirit. Heavy Metal Valley is like a living vestige of the world not only before the Fall but even before the Metastructure, and one might almost imagine, quite easily, that it retained traces of both the world before the World-Machine and the world that the World-Machine created in its own image, and even of the world before that. In a way, Yuri muses, it is as if traces of all the previous worlds have been superimposed on one another, going all the way back to Christian antiquity.

Yes, they are in HMV. The city of Wilbur Langlois, the man of the Law of Bronze.

Yuri and Chrysler see Milan Djordjevic, stammering and fumbling his words, trying unsuccessfully to influence the sheriff’s decision. But they know all too well that nobody can ever influence any of Sheriff Langlois’ decisions.

The Professor needs to spit it out. Now, Yuri thinks to himself, it's his turn to face the Law of the Territory.

"It is a long story, Sheriff Langlois. Very long."

"I've received criminal confessions that lasted hours. I'm listening."

"Well, first there are the books, aren't there?"

"The books?"

"Don't act innocent with me, Sheriff; you're a man of the law. I'm talking about the Italian library."

Milan Djordjevic suddenly finds his tongue. "But ... how can you know about that? It's a secret Vatican operation."

"There were leaks in the Curia, and I ran into one of your old friends in Mexico. The Yucatan."

"Father Ortiz? What did he tell you?"

"The details don't matter. I learned that you were going to bring your library from Europe to America, but I didn't know where in America. Neither did Father Ortiz. And there's a lot of America between Tierra del Fuego and Alaska."

"How did you track me down?"

"A combination of chance, luck, and Providence, or whatever you want to call it, and a little common sense toward the end. And I had help, even here."

Paul Zarkovsky indicates Pluto Saint-Clair, standing next to him, and glances at Yuri and Chrysler.

The sheriff steps in. "We know these two. They have a more or less permanent entry pass. They're friends of Gabriel here. But the other one there, your friend from Junkville; nobody knows him here, Professor, especially me, and that makes me suspicious of him. He won't get past Bulldozer Park, if you want my opinion, and he won't soon be back here, either."

Chrysler decides to intervene on behalf of his Midnight Oil informant. Yuri guesses this is to make good with Pluto Saint-Clair. He knows perfectly well that no one changes the sheriff's mind, especially in conditions like these.

"Sheriff Langlois, without this man the Professor would never have made it here."

"That's not how I understand it. You're the ones that knew of Milan Djordjevic's existence, and where he lives. Not this gentleman."

“That’s right, Sheriff, but this gentleman, as you call him, has been the Professor’s guide. He arranged for a desert taxi to pick him up in Ohio.”

“Ohio isn’t part of my jurisdiction, Campbell. The answer is no. He won’t come any further into HMT, and he won’t be here in the park much longer, either. I’ve already done him a huge favor just by letting him get past Xenon Ridge.”

“Sheriff Langlois, sir,” breaks in the Professor, almost dryly. “I’m going to speak plainly with you. I’ve come practically five thousand miles nonstop from the Mexican border, urgently seeking my friend Milan Djordjevic. And this isn’t about some sweet reunion between two old college friends. If I’m here, it is because—and Milan can confirm this—we developed this library together, not to mention the fact that I collaborated in much of his scientific activity.”

“That’s true,” Djordjevic agrees energetically. “I hope you don’t hold it against me, Paul, but I didn’t know where you were, whether you were dead or alive, and with what happened in southern Europe ... I thought it was probably the former. And then it became urgent.”

“I know. Even more so since Rome was put back in the stranglehold. Besides, I thought the same thing about you when I learned you had vanished from Italy.”

“You went all the way to Rome?”

“I was working in Ukraine at the time of the Fall. I couldn’t get into the Vatican, which is a veritable fortress, but I followed your traces through several monasteries—I went back to the Trieste valley from where your family disappeared, which had just been liberated by the Lombard army, then the other way, toward Turin, where your seminars were. In that area, the combat with the neo-Islamist French was very violent, as you know. I finally went back to Croatia, where you taught, before going to Mexico by way of Argentina, where you also taught. In Mexico, they told me I could pick up the trail again in Corpus Christi, in southern Texas. And then ...”

“Sheriff,” Djordjevic sighs, “the Professor’s arrival at almost the exact same time as that of the library is a sign, another sign from Providence. Someone is taking it upon himself to send us the weapons necessary to fight evil. A man doesn’t cross the Atlantic and thousands of kilometers of desert to play games.”

“I haven’t disagreed with you, Djordjevic. I haven’t yet made a definite decision with regard to your friend from Texas, whose motivation seems

important. I'm talking about his friend, this man we don't know. And for him the answer is no. Period. On the other hand, as you might well imagine, Djordjevic, I need to know a little more so I can get a firm handle on what all of this involves, or might involve."

And there it is, thinks Yuri. Zarkovsky will have to type it all down, tell it all again, explain it all again.

But this time the Professor wouldn't be dealing with Chrysler Campbell, the human computer. This time he would be having the conversation with Sheriff Wilbur Langlois, the man of the Law of Bronze, the man who acts to ensure that secrets are kept—kept, sometimes, in the graves of people who know too much.

* * *

If HNV County is the natural sanctuary of Wilbur Langlois, for the rest of the Territory's residents, and especially those of the city of Grand Junction, this role has fallen to the cosmodrome itself.

This was very quickly established as a given, a tacit agreement, a certainty, a sort of "patriotism." A Faith. First, after the Fall of the Metastructure, in '58 and '59, several barely organized looters often ransacked the Territory in an attempt to attack the cosmodrome facilities. Security officers, supported by what remained of the police forces—specifically, Langlois himself and his small squadron of patrol cars—had exterminated the few operating bands of renegades.

It was later, during the mutation of the "virus" six years later, when the city of Grand Junction had already been emptied of half its population, that the true problems started.

The Territory had until then been subdivided into five counties: Langlois' own, Heavy Metal Valley, occupied the north-central part. Champlain Banks, long a desert, stretched to the east along the Vermont border, from Quebec to the old city of Neon Park. The central west, the northwest, and the whole south-central portion of the Territory were contained in the county of Grand Junction, the largest and most heavily populated of all of them. To the southwest was the county of Junkville, which now included the township of Deadlink. To the west, in Ontario, and farther south, the county of Grand Funk Railroad was established, through which the old railroad tracks of Canadian National intersected the magnetic-suspension

line built in 2025. But of all the counties, only HMT continued to operate in a politically functional manner. Langlois was the last sheriff in the Territory. The last bulwark of liberty against chaos. He was the last legal killer in a place where the only law was that there were no laws. The authority in charge of the cosmodrome, the Metropolitan Consortium of Grand Junction, and its holding firm, Cosmos, Inc., no longer existed, like most of the planet's industries and institutions. Organized gangs, hordes of bandits from who knew where, and post-Islamist raiders from Ontario—all had tried anew to overtake the cosmodrome facilities. Groups of armed men ransacked launchpad number three, at the bottom of Monolith Hills; others went after launchpad number two. The rocket-assembly hangars were hermetically sealed with magnetic locks; they were not connected to the network and thus remained intact. The buildings were constructed to withstand an explosion of ten kilotons of TNT. But the communications center was easily taken by a few bands seeking to grab the hundreds of computers, radar surveillance equipment, spectrographs, radio antennae, contaminated and inoperable as they were, with no real idea of what they might do with this booty but with a certainty that in these troubled times they would at least be gaining something, even if it was virtual.

So the surviving communities of Grand Junction had taken up the initiative again, and Wilbur put all his forces—a little more than twenty men armed with a true arsenal—at their disposition. For entire days, bloody battles raged all around and inside the cosmodrome, beyond Apollo Drive, on Skylab Avenue and the exposed slopes of Monolith Hills.

By the final dawn of a week of combat, the militants of Grand Junction and Sheriff Langlois were able to gaze on the numerous human remains of their victory. On the side of the forces defending the cosmodrome, more than two hundred men and women had been killed, and twice that number wounded, of which at least two hundred would die in the coming days.

The looters from Ontario, along with the Islamists working for some residual emirate and the professional gangsters fighting for their own game, had lost almost five hundred men. The hundred wounded and the prisoners, some few dozen of them, were finished off on Langlois' orders. He instructed that the heads be cut off and put on pikes, then placed atop the peaks of the hills west of the city.

The cosmodrome was never attacked again.

Langlois had also been inspired by the methods used by Grand Junction's surviving communities, even though half of what remained after the Fall of '57 had slowly disappeared since then.

He shouldered new responsibilities. Not only must he protect Heavy Metal Valley but now he was obliged to watch over the cosmodrome as well.

He organized a small brigade of vigilantes in HMT. They formed a reserve force for patrols in order to expand their scope of action, and to organize in combat groups instantly during a possible attack.

HMT became a fortress. Located on a plateau slightly above both the cosmodrome and southern Quebec, it had the advantage of height.

And one day Wilbur Langlois said to himself: *These Christians fight like soldiers.*

He asked to be baptized by one of the priests living in HMT.

* * *

All this was told to Yuri by Chrysler Campbell, who knows one of the sheriff's assistants, whose father participated in several battles against the first waves of looters just before dying of a broken-down implant.

Yuri comes back to the present with a start, to the anthracite tarmac lit by the double illumination of the electric starlight cast by the sodium streetlamp and the hydrogen light of the sun, and to the Professor replying to Wilbur Langlois' endless questions.

Apparently, the boy with the guitar is the least well informed of them all. But Yuri, who has known him for years, knows that this does not make him useless—rather, it is quite the opposite. Certainly he doesn't possess the masses of data that form what men sometimes call, pompously, "hard information." For example, he hasn't had access to any of the biotests, or samples, or scanner analyses Yuri and Chrysler have collected in the Territory through the years. But all he has to do is place his hands on a machine and speak to it, in a language only he knows and understands, and suddenly everything, *everything*, is transformed.

He is untrained, thinks Yuri, observing his slender silhouette with its head a little too large, perhaps, wavering on that long, thin frame. He is the one keeping watch here; he is the invisible Guardian, the Guardian of the starlight, the Guardian of the Sanctuary. He is the luminous shadow of

Wilbur Langlois, the visible Guardian, the Guardian of severed heads, the Guardian of the Valley of Heavy Metal. It is Gabriel who watches over the gates of dawn, while the sheriff monitors the access roads to the rocky peaks.

Chrysler Campbell is a child of the Territory. To catch him, you have to kill him. To kill him, you have to catch him.

“If Pluto Saint-Clair can’t stay here we’ll take him to Junkville. Yuri and I have work waiting for us in the west of the Territory. We’ll leave Professor Zarkovsky to get settled, and you and we can keep talking.”

Chrysler plants his blue gaze deeply, like a weapon, into Link de Nova’s. Yuri decodes the message: *We have a lot to talk about. We’ll come back, Link. Keep your mouth shut while we’re gone.*

“Sirs,” says Paul Zarkovsky a bit formally, still marked by his academic university manners. “I’m obliged to you. I’m extremely conscious of the fact that it was you who brought me here.”

“You’re perfectly right to thank us, Professor,” says Yuri. “We’ll see you again soon. Believe me, we know you haven’t yet told us everything, despite your promise. And it just might be that we still have a few stories to tell you, too. Stories that you will find very interesting, you and Mr. Djordjevic. The Territory’s Legends are Truths that the world hides here. It’s a local saying.”

Yuri can see that he has piqued the curiosity of the two men. And he can also see that what they are still hiding is related to what they have to do in the west of the Territory. And that it in turn is connected to the “second mutation,” to the total numeric exchange between the men and the Post-Metastructure. It is connected to what they alone know. It is connected to their secret.

He sees that Chrysler still knows himself to be ahead in the game.

The sheriff seems satisfied with the situation. He will open his doors to Djordjevic’s professor friend. He will close them to the Professor’s friend from Junkville.

He’s making sure procedure is respected, thinks Yuri. Nothing more.

He’s ensuring that people remain subject to the Law. Nothing more.

The Law of Heavy Metal Valley.

The Law of Wilbur Langlois.

14 > *KILLING BY NUMBERS*

Nora Network welcomes them into her trailer as usual. Without real friendliness, or warmth, or even a trace of anything other than material interest; no sign of any feelings of friendship or recognition or even simple mild cronyism. Nothing like that ever comes from the mouth or emanates from the presence of this old shrew who has built a reputation over the past four decades as a professional creator of rumors, as quick to invent them as to discredit them, and as capable of starting them as of putting a stop to them. She knows, with an exactitude unequaled in the Territory, how to gather true information and to separate the incidental from the important—that is, the profitable. She has been a porn actress, a television sitcom host, a journalist specializing in human interest stories; she launched a magazine for transsexuals in Canada; she was a press attaché for an Indo-Californian film studio. She founded her own multi-sexual entertainment company, launched a line of transgenic cosmetics, speculated in real estate. She was even assistant to the director of the Committee to Reelect the Democratic Governor in Oregon, a few months before the beginning of the Second American Civil War.

She has lived her entire life by gossip, rumor, maneuvering, manipulation, dissimulation, fraud, and swindles of all types. She used up three husbands during her long career; before the End of the World, she collected three comfortable life insurance settlements. She is old, and she has survived the two Falls. She knows a lot of people. She knows a lot of things. She knows a lot of connections between things and people.

She is probably their number-one informer in the territory.

“Too bad she lives in this shitty township on the Ontarian border,” Chrysler says. “If she lived in Junkville we’d each have a dozen red Buicks, like that guy in Carbon City.”

The path leading to Ontario is a heavily forested trail just barely deserving of the name. Fortunately, Chrysler’s father’s survivalist leanings

allowed him to leave his son with the know-how to best situations like this—the know-how, and, just as importantly, the Ford F-350. The paranoid ones are always right. Murphy's Law was created for them, as was the world, and even what destroys it. If the worst is possible, then it has every chance of happening. To this might be added that if the worst appears impossible, don't believe it. It's a ruse.

The sun has risen high in a deep-chrome sky.

They left Pluto Saint-Clair at the bottom of Midnight Oil. The man hardly seemed affected by Sheriff Langlois' categorical refusal to deviate from his rules. Actually, he seemed more preoccupied by something else, something unknown. He had appeared worried all through the return trip, during which he had not unclenched his teeth.

Yuri had recognized the signs of intense reflection. Their informer doesn't have Chrysler's brilliant intuitive intelligence. He mulls over problems indefinitely, like a mole burrowing ceaselessly until it finds the exit, the way to open air. Right now the mole is digging, Yuri thinks as Chrysler drives westward. It's digging for the long haul.

But what is it digging *for*?

It is a little later when the idea surges to life in his mind, like an invisible machine suddenly freed from its shackles. His intelligence is neither the quasi-morbid turnover of Pluto Saint-Clair's nor the intuitively logical flash of Chrysler Campbell's; it is a hybrid of the two, or rather a third form. It is like someone writes a scenario in his mind, as if someone scatters the separate pieces of a great human puzzle across the whole Territory; it is as if someone writes the outline of a possible story inside his brain, and everything—each part of the whole, the whole itself—everything is terribly anchored in reality. That is, in the secret that hides reality. This discovery makes him shudder silently, while the yellow disk of the sun floods the street with blinding light, refracting in clouds of stars in the Plexiglas windshield, and in the distance he sees the angular height of Surveyor Plateau, a bluish mass backlit by a halo of golden dust. A cavalcade of tumbleweeds catches the rays with twisted branches as it whirls by at the side of the road.

* * *

“What’s wrong, Chrysler? You don’t seem too enthusiastic about the idea of visiting Nora Network. Not that I blame you. She’s a nasty old bat.”

“We don’t know if we’re immune, Yuri. Link de Nova and his powers have allowed us to save our bio-implants and our artificial organs; we know they can’t be touched by the *thing*, but what’s happening now is something ... something else entirely. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since yesterday.”

“You know that the entity born of the Metastructure’s death isn’t transmittable from human to human like a virus. That’s what helped us understand that it isn’t a virus. I don’t think we’re risking anything by continuing our investigation, Chrysler.”

“Do you believe what Professor Zarkovsky says? This story about the Language-World?”

“I don’t know. But we know it isn’t a virus. And he knows it, too. There aren’t too many of us who do.”

“If it isn’t a virus, or even a form of the ‘metavirus’ like we thought, how will Link de Nova be able to do anything?”

“We know it isn’t a virus. Its *modus operandi* has changed. It no longer attacks the biological or the mechanical, but their symbolic juncture. So I don’t think Link de Nova’s powers will act like antiviral software—without which it can’t function, like everything else. We have to conclude that it is acting directly on the Post-Machine—that’s the only term that really applies. And so both of them will change their *modi operandi*, their strategies. This is a war.”

“A war? You mean, a war between Link de Nova and the *thing*?”

“Obviously he is the only human being still alive on this Earth that can thwart its plans. If you look at it in a strictly ecological sense, the Post-Machine isn’t doing anything but fighting for its survival. And survival, to it, means the establishment of its own world. In which we are nothing but parasites. Just material to be used and thrown away at will.”

The sun is so bright that it seems as if it could char the retinas of every person on Earth as it bounces off every object it touches. Even the shadows look full of savage light.

“I’m thinking of something else. Something that should have caught our attention a long time ago.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The rumor.”

“The rumor, Yuri? About Link de Nova, you mean?”

“Not really, but that’s part of it.”

“We both know that isn’t a rumor. We’re in a position to know it.”

“I know. Precisely.”

“Precisely what?”

“Precisely, we know it isn’t a rumor.”

“A competition between rudimentary syllogisms, nothing more.”

“Listen to me, though: as you know, this rumor isn’t the only one floating around the territory.”

“Grand Junction could export them on an industrial scale if the world still existed. And fortunately, they would have blurred the radar screens.”

“But as you said yourself, the rumor about Link isn’t a rumor.”

“The competition continues, eh? Amateurs welcome.”

“Follow my reasoning for a minute, please. I thought that was maybe the case for the other rumors, or at least some of them. Then I started cross-checking against what Zarkovsky told us. And I remembered Pluto’s bizarre attitude at the mention of certain details. And ... I think the rumor that says the Metastructure’s death began here is true. I think it’s part of the Territory. I don’t know exactly where, but I think Pluto does.”

“The Fall began in Grand Junction?”

“Yes. I’m almost sure of it.”

“How?”

“Everything fits, Chrysler. But I think more than one person has a piece of the answer, though I’m not positive about it.”

“Pluto? The Professor?”

“Yes, but also Link de Nova, his parents, us, Wilbur Langlois’ old informant in Monolith Hills, our informant maybe, and people we don’t even know.”

“Are you thinking of the HMY Christians?”

“Yes. I have to say that’s very likely.”

The silence is thick, as if the landscape and the light are hanging diaphanously in the air, with the various strata of dust blowing lazily in the wind like large translucent rotors.

“Do you think this has anything to do with what the Professor told us?”

“The Professor told us a lot, Chrysler. He also kept his mouth shut a lot.”

“I mean, what he said about selection, about the first wave for the ’56 update. Grand Junction was part of the selection process; he was very clear about that.”

“He was also very clear when he said there was no link. Remember? Within thirty minutes, the phenomenon expanded over the entire surface of the globe.”

“Yes, but he also told us the first twenty minutes of the recording were missing. Nobody really knows where it spread from, and so it might have begun here.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t have anything to do with his update. I’m pretty sure of that.”

“That seems most logical to me.”

Yuri wonders if this, perhaps, is the limit for Chrysler Campbell, the human computer. Logic.

He can’t say why exactly, but he guesses that logic imposes limitations on the intimate understanding of phenomena. And this thought crystallizes what he wants to say. “No, Chrysler; the update in itself doesn’t have anything to do with it. I mean his story about the first wave. All the technical details distracted our attention from the main thing.”

“And what is the main thing?”

“The main thing is the other rumor that isn’t really a rumor. The main thing is Link de Nova.”

“Explain.”

“All the mysteries related to the Metastructure are related to one another. That’s normal. They form the ultimate network, the one of all human bodies and consciousnesses. So Link de Nova and the exact place where the Fall began are intimately connected. And that is the proof that the place is somewhere in the territory.”

“It’s also the proof that Professor Zarkovsky’s arrival has nothing to do with chance.”

“There’s no such thing as chance, Chrysler. It is proof that the end of the world started here, and proof that it will finish here, too. Even the end of the world must have an ending.”

Campbell doesn’t reply at first, concentrating on the road that climbs sharply up the steep slope of the rocky butte. Then he turns to Yuri for an instant. “The end of the world will be over when the world is, Yuri. When we’re all dead.”

“Possibly, Chrysler. But we can also look at the phenomenon another way. The death of man is a passage. So, the end of death’s endless rein will be the beginning of the reign of eternal life.”

Campbell bursts out laughing. “Shit, Yuri, you talk like the HMV Christians!”

“They might not be wrong. There is mystery in the link between life and death, and the Post-Machine entity is like a sort of life-size game that is obligated to make us discover it.”

“A game?”

“Yes—a sort of giant simulator. A simulator meant to make selections among humans. The Professor is right when he talks about a Camp-World. Except that our destruction in itself isn’t the goal. I don’t know what the goal is—not yet—but it’s like I told you; it is connected to the zero point, let’s call it, and to Link de Nova. It’s connected to what we are investigating right now.”

“The second mutation?”

“Yes. And we might as well admit that it won’t be the last.”

Surveyor Plateau juts up ahead of them, its ochre surface dotted with small glens and clumps of pine woods valiantly resisting the new climatic conditions. It is a vast expanse of rock and copses yellowed by the sun, in the center of which are blocks of mobile homes, cobbled-together shelters, and collapsible houses.

Ten square kilometers now unfarmable, on which nothing will grow except a little more than five thousand souls.

And among these “souls” is the one waiting for them. One that knows everything about everything. And above all, one that uses her tongue to make money whenever the opportunity arises.

The very spirit of the territory. The very spirit of the World.

The aluminum trailer gleams in the windshield like a chunk of diamond fallen from the sky.

The door is open. Nora Network is waiting for them. The soul of the territory in all her splendor, says Yuri to himself.

Perhaps it would have been better if she hadn’t.

“The guy you mean doesn’t live far from here; he’s at the city’s northern exit. I’ll give you his exact address if we can agree on a price. And there is another one, no doubt about it; a similar case on X-15 in Ontario. You know

my contact there. If we can agree on a price, he'll take you to the case in question. It's a woman, as far as I know."

It could just as well be a striped antelope or a Louis Quinze chest of drawers, Yuri thinks. This old bitch lies like breathing.

Chrysler knows how to deal with the old ex-millionaire of Surveyor Plateau. It is amazingly simple. All you have to do is "agree on a price."

He starts out by paying, as if he is at a poker table. He pays the fee to enter the trailer and bother Madame. By acting that way he shows that he is in good faith, and then the negotiation can begin without any tension, both of them well aware of how high or low the other can go.

Pure negotiation. Business. The oldest kind of prostitution in the world. They could be selling Winchesters and doctored whiskey to the Comanche Indians, Yuri thinks, like in the twentieth-century westerns Chrysler has shown him.

They sell information for information. They sell the survival of machines and the men connected to them, for information. They sell good-condition, ready-to-use materials, for information.

They would sell the whole Territory for information. Yes, says Yuri to himself, not without amusement. They're ready to sell the Territory for a map.

A Samsung DVD player, restored to working order and immunized by Link de Nova; more than a hundred DVDs of every type; films from the twentieth century, compilations of television shows, military biographies. Yuri isn't sure this is what the ex-millionaire from Oregon really goes in for, but he knows that after a dozen years even the pickiest people tend to compromise. This is the starting point, and it places Nora Network in a very agreeable position, even if the word *sympathy* obviously isn't applicable to the situation.

The second lot prepared by Chrysler is brought up after another ten minutes or so of negotiations, no more. A small microwave oven from the 2020s, in perfect working order. Yuri realizes that Chrysler, as always, has perfectly anticipated the price for which the old courtesan will sell her information. Especially after the excellent beginning.

And finally, in return for access to X-15, Chrysler asks Nora Network if she has a special preference for any product, anything they might be able to

get to her within the next forty-eight or seventy-two hours.

Her appetite whetted by the newly restored antiques, Nora Network accepts this slightly unusual condition.

She thinks for a few moments; then, struck by sudden inspiration, she stands and goes toward her bedroom, separated from the rest of the trailer by a series of Japanese partitions.

She returns with several metallic objects in her hands.

A few old Braun razors. Battery-operated lightbulbs, able to work within a mechanism or to function independently, with neon or xenon tubes. An antique portable record player for 45 rpm vinyl records. A fire-resistant ceramic miniradiator.

Chrysler stares at the old woman uncomprehendingly.

"These are just electric objects. No computer components. If they're broken it is because they died a natural death. We can't do anything about it."

Nora Network fixes her black eyes on Campbell's. "No. You're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"They didn't die a natural death. Everything worked perfectly until yesterday. Everything. Ten electric lightbulbs with all the filaments still attached in a single block. Their batteries were new. Tested. They're drained and can't be recharged."

Chrysler inspects the objects one by one. "Yesterday, you said?"

"Yes. Yesterday morning they stopped working."

"Just as the storm arrived in the Territory."

"Right."

"If you want me to help you with this problem, Nora, you're going to have to give me some information absolutely free. Please understand, I'm not trying to take advantage of the situation. Necessity makes law, that's all."

"What do you want to know?"

"Are there other cases like yours in the area? A regression of the simplest electrical systems?"

"I hadn't heard of any before it happened to me; I swear, Campbell."

Yuri knows how much stock to put in one of Nora Network's promises, especially when she isn't bound by a real agreement, a contract, an exchange, a transaction. Business is just another form of prostitution for her.

But he also knows they have no choice but to act like they believe her, or at least to accept her version of the facts while politely making clear that she isn't really fooling them.

They load Nora Network's cargo into a Recyclo particleboard box that they then place on the pickup's backseat, and bid their usual summary farewells to their old informer. The aluminum trailer shines for an instant in the windshield as Chrysler makes a half turn and pulls back onto the road that leads north from Surveyor Plateau.

Nora Network was, as usual, very useful.

Even better. For once, she didn't just point out coordinates on a map. For once, she gave them access to a new map. One that is still indecipherable, true, but that just needs to be deciphered.

Yuri has a hunch. They might easily find a connection between the "second mutation" about which they have been gathering data for more than two weeks and this new "illness" afflicting even the simplest electrical machines.

If what Nora Network says turns out to be true, it means that the Post-Machine has kicked into a higher gear. This time it has decided not to leave any time for humans to adapt to the successive "Falls." It seems in a hurry to finish things.

Yuri is suddenly hit with the realization that only Gabriel Link de Nova can bring them the answer. Everything is converging to bring about a new meeting, outside the county of HMTV and as soon as possible.

And as soon as possible—he knows that Chrysler has arrived at the same conclusion when he parks the truck beside a collapsible house—as soon as possible means this very night.

This very night, somewhere in the north of the Territory.

The man from Surveyor Plateau is in what they have established as phase three of the process. The last alphanumeric phase before the transition to pure binary language. Phase one, syntactic dislocation of sentences. Phase two, compression into phonemes. Phase three, alphabetic atomization with systematic progressive serialization, the harbinger of purely numeric language based on the binary code that will mark the fourth phase. Then comes phase five, or the "postlinguistic phase": total digitization of language; transformation of the body into a modem. The phases overlap slightly during transitions from one to another.

The man can produce only series of letters and numbers now. The most terrible part, thinks Yuri, is that the man can still understand what is said to him, and probably what is happening to him as well. Communication hasn't been cut; it has been *cloven*.

They discussed their plan only a little during the drive. Yuri knows they are on the same wavelength; a handful of brief exchanges is generally enough for them to agree upon what must be done.

They, too, are kicking into a higher gear.

Chrysler immediately injects the man with a powerful anxiolytic. Then he waits a little, and explains the situation and prognosis. He explains what they are going to do, and the procedure that must be followed. He tells the man what he must do if he is to have even a chance of survival. What they need him to do if he doesn't want to die, leaving nothing behind but a digital map of himself.

The man mutters something incomprehensible, his head bobbing endlessly up and down.

Yuri is already preparing the various analytical instruments.

There are orange suits at the city's gate. Yuri recognizes them instantly as necro Triads. Clockwork Orange County, from the color of them. A half dozen men are busily occupied around two bodies laid out side by side on the public street. The rear hatch of an old ambulance painted in the township's colors is open, ready to swallow up the crude stretchers on which the necros place the corpses with no more care than a farmer for his slaughtered livestock.

X-15 is the main township in the north of the Territory, located in Ontario. It is on the peripheries of the counties of Grand Junction and Grand Funk Railroad, just on the other side of the hills abutted by Surveyor Plateau. The road leading to it is in a pathetic state of disrepair; Chrysler has to switch into 4×4 mode for most of the drive there, using up precious liters of gasoline. The spiny ghosts of tumbleweeds roll ahead of them on the path like vegetal advance men.

But now, gasoline doesn't matter much. Nor does the state of the roads. Or even the sandstorms.

Yuri, maybe for the first time in his life, can see a shadow of worry on his colleague's face. Chrysler doesn't like this, this conjunction of events, and

Yuri cannot blame him, even if he sees things with a certain degree of fatalism. The “second mutation,” the “Third Fall,” whatever you want to call it—the *digitalization of human language* seems to be happening in concert with a new attack on electrical technology. This time, its threat reaches down to the simplest current modulator, the smallest alternator, the most archaic battery, a simple neon tube. Down to the tiniest spark.

And more worrisome still, this new attack seems to coincide with the upcoming arrival of a precious library in the Territory. And with the recent one of a man who presided over the design of the final version of the Metastructure.

It is clear that a lot is going on. Much too much. Much too much to take it as any kind of coincidence.

It is clear that the Post-Machine is taking the lead. It seems to know their resistance points, their plans, in advance.

Eventually, Chrysler must admit that his young friend Yuri is right. It is like a game.

A game on a global scale.

A game that they have to win, at any price, to avoid complete extinction.

The X-15 victim was indeed a woman. Nora wasn't lying, muses Yuri to himself, almost disappointedly. It was a woman. Is *still* a woman, he mentally corrects himself. Which means that the moment when she will no longer be a woman is getting closer every second.

A young woman a few years older than him; twenty-five or twenty-six at most. She is a Mohawk mixed-blood named Lucie Lebois-Davenport. She lives in a small makeshift hut built of various scavenged materials. Nora Network's contact, a former cop with the Vermont State Police, has explained to them that she arrived in the area shortly after the “Second Fall” of '63, from what remains of Montreal.

Pretty, thinks Yuri, contemplating the nearly nude body stretched out on the helium bed.

The neighbors are aware of what is happening, but they have no idea what to do, and they make no attempt to hide their mistrust of strangers—especially strangers like Chrysler and Yuri. Chrysler, however, immediately sets them straight:

“We aren’t members of a necro Triad from Junkville, I promise you. If men like the ones you described to us have been lurking around this area, they weren’t us.”

“Men in green uniforms with a white snake on the back,” one of the neighbors elaborates.

Snake Zone Triads, both of them think immediately. The telepathic bond that connects them at such moments vibrates between their brains.

The competition is getting fiercer; the race is tightening. The death benefits are increasing in value.

“We want to try to understand what is happening, and to save this young woman,” Yuri says. “If you don’t believe us, go talk to Diamond-back Curtiss here in X-15, or ask Nora Network on Surveyor Plateau.”

Chrysler takes advantage of the shock that Nora’s name still provokes in these parts.

“In two days, three at most, this young woman will be dead. We want to take samples and conduct biotests. One of you can stay as a witness if you like. When we have the results of the first tests, we’ll tell you what we can do.”

Yuri understands why his friend is lying to them. Of course they’re going to take the girl away! At any price—meaning, of course, as cheaply as possible. They will take her to Surveyor Plateau, where they will pick up the man in phase three, and then get everyone to the north of the Territory and Link de Nova. To the one that might be able to save them. To the one who needs to know—to let them all know—if he can do anything to help or not.

The man and the girl are going to serve as guinea pigs for Link de Nova, Yuri thinks. And for us all.

Young Lebois-Davenport is in the middle of phase four. She recites endless lists of binary numbers at a still-comprehensible but very rapid speed, something Yuri has already seen during his investigation in Junkville. But the juxtaposition of the two cases—the man on Surveyor and the girl here, so close in time and space—has ignited a spark of new understanding in his mind.

As long as they are in the alphanumeric phase, they can still interact with the world, the outside, other men. With difficulty, certainly, but at least it is still possible.

As soon as phase four begins, it will be over. Communication will not be cut or cloven, it will be saturated.

And when they move into phase five, which is no longer really a “phase,” communication will be neither cut nor cloven nor saturated. It will become the body of language itself, in its entirety, transforming the body into a digital map of itself.

They proceed with their tests and biopsies, and with the initial analysis.

Chrysler turns his head toward the witness and asks him to go and fetch the authorities for the residential block; when they arrive, full of sympathy and interest in the “doctors” at work, he requests permission to take the “patient” to their “private clinic” in Aircrash Circle.

The men and women of the neighborhood council deliberate for long minutes; then the spokesman announces, fatalistically, that they agree to Chrysler’s request. There is probably nothing else left to do, the man sighs.

Chrysler thanks them as a humanitarian doctor would—if any still existed.

Then they load the girl onto the military stretcher Chrysler inherited from his father, which can fit into any vehicle—helicopter, plane, tank, armored truck, warship.

Or a Ford F-150 pickup.

They leave X-15 and drive toward the center of the Territory as the sun is reaching its zenith. The sky is the color of the Atlantic Ocean at this time of year—a deep, cold blue containing the white-gold disk of the sun.

Then, later, the black vehicle stops a few minutes away from the former border of the state of New York, just long enough for a fourth passenger to take his place in the backseat next to the Recyclo particleboard box. This man does not speak as they cross the west of the county toward Aircrash Circle. Their “private clinic,” thinks Yuri, smiling.

In the bed of the pickup, under the Atlantic sky and the white-gold sun, lying on a military stretcher dating from the Second Gulf War, a young woman recites an endless series of binary numbers, long sequences of ones and zeros projected toward the stars, hidden by the haze of day.

15 > MIDNIGHT RAMBLER

The ritual is always the same. They have been doing it for two years. Chrysler came up with it back at the very beginning.

“The virus that attacked you and the one that attacks machines are of the same type. You must realize that your days are numbered. And you’re probably also aware that there is no known antidote. Do you understand me? Say yes or no, with your head.”

There is a weak nod. The first of what will be more and more forceful confirmations, Yuri thinks.

“However, even though there is no officially recognized antidote, you may know that there are some experimental methods that may stimulate a general remission. Do you understand me? Say yes or no, with your head.”

The man nods again, a bit more firmly.

“We can treat you using secret medicine. In exchange for certain items that are of interest to us, we can make this treatment available to you. Our first treatment of you would be purely experimental, though, and we ask nothing in return. Do you understand me? Say yes or no, with your head.”

There is another nod of agreement, still fairly timid. Yuri knows the process to come by heart. Chrysler is openly acting like a pusher. First dose is free. But it won’t change anything important.

“We cannot guarantee 100 percent success. Your syndrome is new. But we are the only ones in the Territory who can even attempt to care for you. We have healed people affected by both the First and Second Falls. Your case is a little different, but we believe we represent your last chance. If you understand me, nod yes.”

There is another nod, more forceful this time, indicating the desire to know more. A recurring pattern.

“I am not going to tell you anything about the treatment we will give you, for a simple reason: once the operation begins, I will inject you with a dose of synthetic scopolamine. You will not be asleep, but within a few minutes,

the five or six hours preceding the operation will be erased from your memory. You must formally accept this if you want to be treated by our secret medicine. Nod yes or shake your head no.”

The man nods yes, of course. Like they always do.

“With some patients, my synthetic scopolamine works only partially. If memories of bribes ever come back to you, and if you tell anyone about them, we will know where to find you, and I will kill you with my own hands. Is that clear? Nod yes or shake your head no.”

Yuri knows this last bit is a lie; Campbell’s programmable drug always works precisely and perfectly. But Chrysler is a man whose prudence takes the form of cold audacity. You never know. And some of the information from this afternoon, including this preliminary conversation, will not be completely erased—and this is deliberate—by the scopolamine. The man won’t remember anything except the fact that he must not, under any circumstances, remember anything at all.

The man nods, tries to speak a few words, abandons the attempt.

Beneath the noise of their conversation, Yuri can hear the muted sound of the numeric monologue of the young woman from X-15, like a mantra repeated without end. A mantra composed of two simple words. Two numbers. The mantra of the digital body.

“For security reasons we operate at night. In the meantime, this afternoon we’ll complete our tests, scans, and biopsies. We will also inject you with various tracers—neuronal nanomodules, of course. Nod yes if you understand.”

This time the affirmative response comes quickly, as usual.

“Don’t worry. Everything will go fine. Just trust us.”

The nod is automatic, like always. Like every time a person realizes that his survival is no longer in his own hands.

Chrysler begins rummaging in his steel armoires for the various biological analysis equipment, while Yuri busies himself opening one of the heavy locked boxes and extracting tubes and probes of all kinds.

Camp Doctors, he thinks, suddenly struck by the revelation.

The day passes slowly for the guinea pigs and the researchers alike. Tests. Biopsies. Neuroprobes. Nanomodules. Injections. Scans. Tomography. Radioactive tracers. Magnetic mapping. Recording of data. Compilation of data. Processing of data.

This is all man is now, Yuri thinks. This is what the unknown entity has brought us to.

Even before it begins killing, the thing acts to transform you into a catalogue of numbered data. It has eradicated nearly all the technology on the planet, but it still acts as a sort of hypertechnology itself. It acts like a Metastructure for which humans are not “hardware platforms,” but rather software and programming languages. It acts like a God, seeking to *uncreate* Man.

The world order has been totally, absolutely, infinitely reversed.

The Lebois-Davenport girl is resplendently beautiful as the numeric death takes her away, hour by hour. Her amber skin, marbled by the fluorescent tracks of the radioactive tracers, glows softly silver under the beams of their examining lights.

Her blue eyes are fixed on the ceiling as if it is a heaven she has never seen before. Her black hair lies in long curls and arabesques against the whiteness of the helium bed. Her trembling, slightly parted lips issue faster and faster streams of binary numbers.

Her body is the subject of both men’s undivided attention.

Nothing sexual could ever cross through the invisible membrane that separates them from her.

She is a woman of the Camp-World. And she is probably going to die.

They are the Doctors of the Camp-World. And it has never been more certain that they will end by selling her back to some necro Triad.

One evening during the previous summer, Gabriel Link de Nova went to the cosmodrome again. As always, he had carefully prepared for his nocturnal expedition, hiding from his parents and the sheriff’s men who patrolled the area. It was almost fifteen kilometers round-trip, on foot. Not just a little stroll on the Ridge.

On that night, the moon had been full and round and a little reddish, hanging low on the horizon as he came into view of the cosmodrome. The stars were just above his head; a hot, dry wind was blowing from central Canada, propelling wandering clusters of tumbleweeds among the stone blocks and caressing his skin with the gentleness of a passing lover. The sky was deep and pure and dark, and in the midst of the star-dotted blackness he could see the metallic points, in bunches linked by long shining cords, of

the Orbital Ring, which had been spinning silently in space for twelve years.

As was his habit, he had wandered between the launchpads, standing like sand-covered pyramids hiding secrets in the process of being forgotten. He walked through the vast hangars, closed for more than six years, inside which are the hulks, invisible to the eyes of the world, of the last twelve rockets assembled in the Territory. He crossed the cosmodrome in the other direction, to the west, filled with a profound sense of melancholy, watching his feet raise puffs of dust at each step on the enormous, deserted tarmac. Then, hearing the distant approach of one of the sheriff's foot patrols, he took refuge in Monolith Hills, taking an abandoned road whose name—North Junction Road—was by some miracle still readable on its old sign.

He had never been in this particular part of the county. He decided to explore it.

The slopes of Monolith Hills dominated the northern arc of the city's peripheral boulevard here, known as Apollo Drive where the old road connects to it. When he reached the summit of the hills he could see the huge crater of the cosmodrome, lit by the moon like a quicksilver lake with the protruding ruins of a drowned civilization.

It was the summer of 2069. July. If the world had still existed, there would have been an immense carnival going on in honor of the Apollo 11 mission. His father had told him that the Cataclysm took place a few hours after the great festivities commemorating the Russian *Sputnik* on October 4, 2057. He had also described how, in 2061, the Mohawk Consortium of the cosmodrome had struggled to organize a grand fair for the centennial of Gagarin's flight. Its success was mixed, but they had all put forth their best efforts, his father had told him. "*We put our whole hearts into it.*" The cosmodrome had managed to launch a small three-passenger rocket toward the Ring. Everyone had wanted so badly to be hopeful about it. Gabriel, barely four years old, had been at that orbital launch. He remembers it vaguely now; it is his very first memory of the launch of a space vehicle. And this very first memory of the launch of a space vehicle corresponded with the very last event of the kind to take place at the cosmodrome. Or in the world.

Now the cosmodrome will never see another festival dedicated to the space adventures of the twentieth century. The cosmodrome will never see another rocket take off for the Ring. The cosmodrome is awaiting the desert.

Where is he, now?

Oh yes—isn't that Nexus Road over there in the distance, below the vast, echoing space that still serves as the entry to HNV County?

He climbs toward the northern end of the Monolith Hills strip, a place he rarely goes. He has never come here by this particular route, via the cosmodrome and Apollo Drive. These rows that mount the sides of the deforested hills, glowing opalescent in the moonlight. These clusters of dwellings that get denser as one approaches the strip. These capsule motels whose still-bright colors catch the eye from far away.

Like this one. There, not far from an autobridge that straddles North Junction Road. Orange-colored residence capsules, stripped down by successive bands of looters, now just so many rectangular holes in the structure. A large building; at least a hundred monoblocs gleaming in the moonlight, honeycombing the vast gridded cube. He explores it, venturing into the strip itself.

HOTEL LAIKA, he reads on the enormous sign over the entrance.

The hotel seems deserted; the interior, unlike the exterior, is utterly dark; not even a brazier or a cobbled-together gas lamp is burning. No refugees have sought shelter here. It's a little bizarre.

He stands facing the hotel's main door, oddly hesitant to penetrate this vast capsule-skeleton drowning in darkness. A strange atmosphere, like an insistent feeling of *déjà vu*, and then the dull sensation that something is waiting for him there, inside. Something he knows. And something that knows him.

He must be getting paranoid, he tells himself firmly. The sheriff and his father have always officially forbidden him from going to the strip—a dangerous place, especially for a lone teenager, and especially at night, as Wilbur Langlois explained firmly. *"If I ever find you there, believe me, it will be worse than if you had breached a cosmodrome red zone."*

At that instant, he sees the dog. Balthazar, the HNV guard dog. Wilbur Langlois' dog. The bionic dog. The dog-sheriff. The dog who saw him

before he saw it—or, rather, the dog that felt him before he saw it, even in total darkness.

The dog's got me, he thinks.

At this sort of paper chase, he must admit, the dog is much better than the best human.

One of the rumors floating around the Territory says that the Cataclysm of the Metastructure was related to an attack that took place on the same day at the cosmodrome. A man, a professional killer whose body was found a little later in the area, had fired a hyperkinetic missile at the inaugural rocket of a great private program aimed at the mass colonization of the Ring. A variant of this rumor talks about a terrorist group with connections to the Android Liberation Front, claiming that activists had somehow managed to interfere with the Metastructure. Other versions tell of an attack that had been “too successful,” to the great surprise of its instigators.

Link knows of many rumors of the same type swirling around the Territory. All of them have some measure of truth to them.

One of them in particular was nagging at his memory that night as he watched Wilbur Langlois' dog coming toward him in the parking lot of the Hotel Laika.

The rumor in question said that the missile had been launched from a capsule hotel on the strip. A hotel that was guarded at the time by a former Special Forces cyberdog. A dog that often went to Heavy Metal Valley, and to a place called Deadlink. ...

Here, Link de Nova had said to himself. It was here; it was this now-deserted capsule hotel. Balthazar used to work here. From here he had gone to HMT, where Wilbur Langlois had gradually tamed him. It was from here that the missile had been launched against the cosmodrome rocket, on the very day of the First Fall. The dog hadn't come back here tonight to trap him; he had come here for the place itself. Everything pointed to the fact that he came here often, to remember the time when he was its official guardian.

Maybe it was here, after all, that the Metastructure died.

Link rides his hybrid quad bike to the county of Champlain Banks, in the east of the Territory. It is one of Campbell's habitual rendezvous points. Not far from HMT, in one of the most depopulated areas in the whole region. Maximum security, Campbell says—outside the sheriff's jurisdiction, and far enough away from all of the townships, even the most isolated ones. It

was during the ride to this semiarid strip bordering what remains of Lake Champlain and the Vermont border that Link de Nova's mind wandered back to that strange night in July, when he figured out that Balthazar, the Hotel Laika, and the death of the Metastructure are connected by some mysterious causality.

Now, sitting on the quad bike in the middle of the trail, near the big cedar, as usual, he awaits the exact time of the rendezvous.

Campbell is as punctual as an atomic clock. All Link can do is make sure that he always shows up early. He knows what is at the root of the phenomenon—his permanent, incurable anguish of any uncontrolled passing of time. He could never bear to be even a minute, even a single second, late. That minute, that second, might as well be an eternity when they are located on the other side of what is knowable, controllable, livable. Those bits of time are like open wells in the nothingness, the infinity of chaos.

He waits calmly, watching the colors change on the lake water under the fiery gold light and the cool glow of the moon.

Then, finally, at the appointed time, he hears the Ford's motor and, a moment later, sees its headlights surge out of the blackness like a halogen monster's two pairs of eyes.

"Did you tell the sheriff? He isn't too accommodating lately."

Chrysler Campbell is referring, Gabriel thinks, to the latest incident with Yuri. The former Omega Blocks resident, he knows, is anxious not to lose access to HMV.

Access to Link de Nova.

"Of course, Chrysler. The only thing I don't tell him about is my going to the cosmodrome, because he has declared that a 'red zone,' officially prohibited. For the rest, don't worry. There won't be any problems with him."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?"

If there won't be any problems from him, then who might they come from? The answer comes to them soon enough.

"As I've told you, my father is becoming more and more reticent. The arrival of his friend the Professor hasn't solved anything. I assume they've discussed it. My father talked to me very seriously tonight before I took off on my bike."

"What did he say?"

“He was a little vague, like he always is. I think he’s also very preoccupied at the moment. The Professor, the library. But in the end it was the same argument he always uses, you know. We don’t have the right to ‘sell’ a gift that was given to me by God. It’s ‘simony,’ he says. He wants to talk to the sheriff about it—Langlois is baptized now.”

Campbell sighs. These HMV Christians! “You just have to tell him what I told you. One, we aren’t *selling* anything at all. We’re conducting an exchange for the good of everyone involved. Two, we’re acting in the best interest of the community. And three, we’re very careful to ensure its safety.”

“You’re the one that needs to talk to him, Campbell.”

“I’m thinking more and more about it, Link. In the meantime, time is passing. I need to explain to you what happened tonight.”

“What’s special about tonight?” asks the young man from Heavy Metal Valley, a little mockingly.

Chrysler smiles a terrible smile. “Tonight, my boy, we are facing what we call the ‘Third Fall.’ I’ll explain. Because it is possible that tonight we will be confronted for the first time with the limits of your powers.”

Link has never doubted that there were limits to his powers. He has always known that, sooner or later ...

Has that day come? Tonight?

This night, after the storm? This night after the night?

Their first priority, says Chrysler Campbell, is the machines. The electrical objects Nora Network foisted off on them. Yuri had tried earlier to argue with him on this point. “The girl from X-15 is doing worse and worse. She should be our main concern, if you ask me.”

Chrysler had replied, very calmly, his lips quirking in that hint of a smile that is worth all the hysterical laughter in the world—this world whose laugh is, of course, the color of a necro Triad—“We have to stay rational, Yuri. The two phenomena might be linked, but we don’t know anything for sure. I want to stay on familiar ground as long as we can. It will help Link de Nova get a handle on the problem, and then we can move on to humans.”

The man sitting in the backseat had said nothing, not even an unintelligible murmur. His fate had not been in his own hands for a long time now.

So now the electric lightbulb glows very dimly in Link de Nova’s hands, sparking with a thousand silvery glints, wavering and ephemeral.

He holds it close to his face. The moonlight plays with its transparent glass and the chromed aluminum tubes as he turns it around slowly.

Then he speaks to it. A low murmur. Some phrases are repeated, others are constantly changing. Yuri has often wondered what kind of language Link de Nova uses, but the young man never gives him a straight answer. “It comes by itself, not from me, really; I don’t think. My father calls it *glossolalia*.”

He speaks to the electric lightbulb like he has spoken to so many other machines and so many other human beings; to portable computers, communications systems of all types, medical equipment, electronic navigational systems and processors for cars, television screens and computer monitors, disk readers, bionic implants and clusters of cells modified in various ways and transplanted inside victims’ bodies.

He touches the electric lightbulb with his hands, as he has touched so many other machines and so many human beings.

And the lightbulb emits a miniscule but very intense point of orange light at the very tip of its filament.

And the neon combusts.

And there is light.

The battery-operated lightbulbs form a half-circle of large, yellow, oblong fireflies at Link de Nova’s feet.

Ten of them, thinks Chrysler Campbell. He’s made ten lightbulbs function again. The batteries in their aluminum sleeves emit their unmistakable wavering hum. They work. Probably better than they have ever worked before.

Link de Nova’s powers can fight this new attack against the machines, the last machines. Campbell has never felt so relieved. Yuri was right; the boy’s powers can adapt to the *thing*’s changing strategies.

A few minutes later, the electric grating of the lightbulbs is joined by the insectlike buzzing of the Braun razors as they are repaired one by one. Then the low, continuous sound of hot air projected by the ceramic radiator.

And finally Chrysler watches, almost amazed, as an antique vinyl record dating from the 1970s—a century ago—a “single” by a group called Led Zeppelin, executes its forty-five rotations per minute on the deck of the old battery-operated turntable. Link knows how to use it; he takes the plastic

arm between his fingers and sets the needle into the groove. The strains of “Whole Lotta Love” resonate among the bare rocks and the waters of the lake. The record will probably end up in the boy’s garage, Campbell muses to himself. He’ll just tell Nora Network that you can’t get something for nothing.

Everything works. Chrysler does not try to hide his contentment. Everything works, and works so well as to exceed his own expectations. Link has repaired everything; even better, he has *rejuvenated* it all—the pieces are like new, as is typical of the boy’s work, and undoubtedly immunized as usual against any new attack as well.

There is still hope. The Third Fall will have to reckon with them.

Everything works, thinks Yuri. Works to perfection. Link has repaired Nora Network’s machines perfectly. He can read the satisfaction, the joy, the buoyancy in Chrysler’s face. It all works. Too well. They are probably going to have to reckon with the Third Fall.

Link de Nova looks for a long time at the man standing face-to-face with him. He looks at him as if he is a sort of incomprehensible life form. What is happening? Yuri reads a mixture of stupefaction and incredulity in the boy’s moonlit face.

Gabriel’s hands move instinctively toward the area of dysfunction, as always. In this case they encircle the man’s head, making a crown of flesh on flesh. Then one of his hands moves to the man’s lips, and the other to the nape of his neck.

He speaks. Rather, he emits a few sounds.

But instead of continuing to talk in his improvised language from who knows where, he stops almost as soon as he has begun.

He raises his head to look at the man’s face.

He gazes at him for long moments, keeping his hands in place on the man’s head.

Then he says, simply: “It is impossible.”

He pulls his hands away quickly from the head of the man, who tries to babble a few incomprehensible phrases.

Chrysler looks at them, concerned.

“What’s impossible, Link?”

It is logical, terribly logical, thinks Yuri. Machines, even biological ones, are nothing but the unique access point opened to Link de Nova. The *thing* must be aware of it. It is mocking them. Link is alone, or nearly so.

And it, it has the rest. That is, everything.

So it has closed off access to what, in humans, is neither biological nor mechanical.

And against that, Link de Nova's powers are visibly unable to find an evolutionary solution, to adapt.

The Post-Machine has kept an ace up its sleeve.

They are in real danger.

* * *

During the return drive, neither Yuri nor Campbell nor the man from Surveyor Plateau utters a single word. What is there to say?

As agreed, Chrysler injected the guy and the girl with his synthetic scopolamine just before they got into the truck. From then until now, as they are driving the man back to Surveyor Plateau, the programmable drug has selectively erased from his memory all traces of the last six or eight hours. As for the girl, it has all gone strictly according to routine. Campbell knows, of course, that neither of the victims has much more time, and that neither of them can express themselves in a comprehensible way, but still he would never take even the slightest risk. One day, he said about some other victim: "They can still write, have dreams, communicate via signs. There's hypnosis. There might even be an accidental remission of the amnesia. Someone might torture them until they spill everything, or inject them with some kind of truth serum, or even carry out a neurosurgical autopsy and find traces. My synthetic scopolamine is a programmable drug; it wipes everything clean, like when you reformat a hard drive. We can take care of their bodies, but we have to completely erase their memories."

We are the Camp Doctors, thinks Yuri.

Chrysler drives robotically, the truck's speed unchanging, his eyes fixed unmovingly on the headlight-illuminated road.

Yuri is fully aware of his accomplice's disappointment. He feels the same way.

Link never replied to Chrysler's impatient questions about the situation of the man from Surveyor Plateau. He simply asked to see the girl from X-

15 as soon as possible.

She has passed to another stage during the course of the day. She is inevitably approaching the post-phase, the transformation into a modem, into a pure communication machine using binary language. She doesn't have much longer.

Link climbed into the rear bed of the truck and gazed for a long time at the dying young girl, this girl drowning in numbers.

He knelt near the stretcher and placed his hands around the head from which the stream of numbers continued to flow endlessly. But this time he didn't even bother trying to murmur a few words. Indeed, he was speechless.

His hands were violently repelled from Lucie Lebois-Davenport's skull as if by a sort of magnetic field.

Link's mouth was wide open on an absolute emptiness, a terrifying silence.

He stared at Chrysler, then at Yuri, a look of true desperation on his face.

Then he leaned toward the young girl without saying anything. He stared at her for another long moment. Yuri saw tears gathering in his eyes, sparkling in the moonlight. Tears that rolled, glittering, down his cheeks, dried by the hot air blowing from the west, as the girl fixed her wide-open eyes on the sky that was no longer the sky, but to which she addressed her litany of numbers, from the earth that was no longer the earth; series of numbers launched toward the cold orbits of the worlds observing the death of this World.

Link de Nova stretched his hand toward her. Eventually he placed his index finger very lightly on her forehead, just brushing the skin, and Yuri saw him make the sign of the cross, a sign that he then repeated on himself in the particular manner of Catholic Christians, the specific order of forehead, navel, left shoulder, right shoulder. Yuri also heard him murmur a few phrases in Latin. He did not understand the meaning of the words, but he knew it was one of the main prayers used by the communities of Heavy Metal Valley.

Link pulled back slowly, and got down wordlessly from the truck bed.

His powers could not touch her. They could not speak to her.

It was then that Yuri realized that Gabriel had just been appealing to a power other than his own.

16 > *ASTRONOMY DOMINE*

When the girl dies in the early hours of the morning, Yuri and Chrysler can only marvel at the sudden, exponential growth of the evil. Each human case seems, paradoxically, to retain some type of singularity within this process designed by nature to annihilate them all.

She passed to the post-phase during the night. They had just come back from their rendezvous with Link de Nova and unloaded their paraphernalia into the Combi-Cube when they heard emissions coded in pure binary begin to intermingle with the numbered recitation that had, for a while now, increased in speed so much as to be incomprehensible.

Then, within twenty minutes at the most, terminal digitalization had completely overtaken language—meaning her individuated body, Yuri had thought at the time, without really grasping the full implications of his own idea.

As the pale sun slanted its horizontal rays across the landscape of Air-crash Circle, the girl had breathed her last, exhaling a final volley of binary numbers at two mega-octets per second. Campbell had managed to calculate the precise speed of the transfer.

“It has speeded up a lot since the last case,” he had said. “We might say that the *thing* is making constant progress, like the early-century modems.”

“No,” Yuri had said abruptly. “I don’t believe that. I mean, this acceleration is connected to the individuals themselves. The *thing* programs their deaths down to the microsecond, I believe, according to data we don’t know.” This speed and rhythm of transfer is what constitutes their unique singularity, thinks Yuri, unable to express himself clearly to his friend. This speed and rhythm of transfer is what delineates their life and death. So it is what permits the phenomenon to individuate itself in them, all the way down to their deaths.

“Do you have a preference?” Campbell had asked, standing in front of the immobile, silent body.

“Preference? What do you mean?”

“The necros. You live in Snake Zone; want to call the guys in green?”

Yuri didn’t answer.

He had never felt this way.

He had never felt this way about someone who died. Someone he didn’t even know.

Someone he hadn’t been able to save.

“Chrysler,” he had whispered finally. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What? What idea?”

“The necro Triads. We shouldn’t sell them this girl’s body.”

“The Snake Zone guys? Would you rather we call Vortex?”

“No. No, Chrysler. None of them. I’m talking about all the Junkville Triads.”

“I hope you’re joking. Except for her linguistic devolution, all her organs are perfect. You and I both saw the test results from yesterday. We’ll get a high price for them.”

“I’m just wondering if the devolution in question isn’t changeable—if it might not jump from one individual to another via organ transplant.”

“You know the *thing* doesn’t work that way. It isn’t a virus. Yuri, what’s going on? What are you saying?”

“We don’t know anything about this ‘second mutation.’ It could have changed its *modus operandi*, as you call it.”

“Pure and pointless speculation. If it had changed this part of its *modus operandi*, we would already have heard about it from the Triads. No, no, no, Yuri.”

“It gets worse. You know what they’re saying in Neo Pepsico. That when the organs aren’t suitable for transplant, the Triads discreetly sell them to grocery stores. It’s fast-food meat for cannibals, okay?”

“And now the Junkville gossip. Shit. We’re almost out of gasoline, Yuri; fuel is getting more and more rare in the Territory. Good thing we have the HMTV connection, but for that we need cash, like in Reservoir Can, incidentally.”

“The girl is worth more than a few cans of gasoline.”

“Yuri, she’s dead.”

“She deserves better than to be sliced up by the Snake Zone or Vortex Townships butchers.”

“Yuri,” Campbell repeats, irritated, “*She’s dead*. Okay? She’s dead, Yuri. There’s nothing left but her body, around fifty-five kilograms of organs. And that is what has been worth its weight in gold in Junkville for a long time now.”

“I know. I can’t explain it. Her body was, and will be. We shouldn’t cut it up into separate pieces to be used and thrown away. Not this way.”

“Shit, Yuri, you’re talking more and more often like the HMV Christians! I’m going to have to keep you away from Link de Nova!” His laugh is a little ironic, but it holds no anger or sarcasm. It is just a joke to him, a bit of passing madness on his friend’s part.

“It has nothing to do with Link, Chrysler, I swear. It has to do with us.”

“Us? What do we have to do with it? We didn’t kill her! We tried to save her!”

“I know. Please, don’t make me try to explain it.”

“Then, in this case you’ll have to excuse me, but I’m going to make the decision myself.”

“What decision?”

“The choice. The choice of necro Triad. I’m going to call the guys from Clockwork Orange County; they’re competing with Vortex now, which will let me cultivate my contacts there. And you can relax, since I’m not calling the Snake Zone guys.”

Yuri can find no words in reply. He feels so weak, so fragile in the face of his friend’s cold, mechanical will; he feels so close to the girl lying on the stretcher that he feels as if he is dead, but—intense astonishment pulsing in waves through his brain—at the bottom of this well of nothingness engulfing him, he can see a light.

Distant, perhaps, but a million suns are making the bonfire.

The response he might have given Campbell is in this furnace; it is in this fire that all the answers to all their questions can be found.

Campbell stows the body in a refrigerated box operated by a deuterium battery Link de Nova restored for them. It is a real medicolegal conservation box. The necro Triads know Yuri and Campbell as an occasional supply source, always at the cutting edge of technology.

For a few instants, Yuri envisions a sepulcher for the girl from X-15, a tomb like those he sees sometimes in that part of Heavy Metal Valley that has become a cemetery, among the automobile carcasses. A dignified,

easily seen tomb; a trace of what she was. She, as a unique being. A singular *place*.

Link de Nova murmured a rite earlier that belonged in a baptism or some sacrament—Yuri isn't sure—in the back of the pickup truck. The girl should be buried here, where she died, in Aircrash Circle, instead of disappearing into the immense system of permanent recycling that is the city of Junkville.

Yuri remains silent all the rest of that day, conducting his own batteries of tests and leaving Chrysler to take the body in its refrigerated box to the township of Clockwork Orange.

The thing is feeding on us in every sense of the word, he cannot stop himself from thinking.

Judith Sevigny is perhaps even a notch above beautiful. What should he call it? Sublime? Her simple presence flies splendidly in the hideous face of all the filth on this planet that is no longer anything but an experimental survival camp. It is a source of pure water that flows amid all the putrid garbage on the globe, immaculate, luminous, surreal. All by itself, it contradicts the very existence of this world. Her beauty, he thinks to himself, isn't really human; it isn't entirely of the animal world, but neither does it belong in the smoky universe of ghosts. She is as beautiful as the stars she is looking at; as beautiful as a landscape frozen in the rosy ice of dawn; as beautiful as the Grand Canyon; as beautiful as a whole ocean; as beautiful as a storm engulfing the world; as beautiful as a desert; as beautiful as the fall of an asteroid; as beautiful as a simple ray of light.

It is almost a miracle, he muses to himself; such beauty, contained in just a human body. As conscious as she must be of it, she takes great pains not to show it. And that is interior beauty, the true form of intelligence.

And Judith, he knows, is at seventeen years old one of the most intelligent and tactful women in the community.

He considers himself a pure and simple idiot next to her, an idiot who has been offered a mysterious gift in compensation.

His hands moist and his heart pumping like a turbo-engine as always, he moves toward the small veranda where he knows she will be.

Her secret garden.

Her "garage."

Her night.

* * *

Her night, her “garage,” is the sky, of course.

The small house she has had installed at one end of her antique Dodge Caravan has a roof made of extremely transparent composite that possesses a polycarbon nanogrid built for maximum absorption of the effects of refraction. It also opens, using a system made of sliders and toothed wheels operated by a small electric motor.

And just under the roof, there is the telescope.

The astronomical telescope. Pointed toward a quadrant of the sky. And under the sky, under the composite roof, under the eye of the telescope, there is Judith Sevigny. Above her is the black and infinite sky, the myriads of glittering stars, the liquid silver halo of the starlight.

He can see her silhouette through the transparent walls of the veranda, bathed in the remaining dim light of the moon, which has just disappeared behind the horizon.

The low light makes her even more beautiful, more enticing. He feels a sudden erection press against the crotch of his worn fatigues. Cold sweat trickles down the back of his neck, though it must be at least 100 degrees outside. When he sees her, everything blurs inside him as if whipped up by an internal tornado, a vortex of paradoxical sensations, an infinity of variations on his own identity, the cosmos as a constantly reinvented singularity. To see her is to capture rays from the World of Beauty, a world not at all like the one in which they really live.

That is, for Gabriel Link de Nova, aged twelve years and a few weeks, and two thousand years old, old as dust. That is, for this poor young man who knows how to speak to machines but who can barely hold a conversation with this young woman. That is, for this poor idiot savant who knows how to lay hands on artificial organs but who cannot even imagine putting his hand on her beauty, the beauty of an angel fallen to Earth.

He knocks softly on one of the veranda-observatory’s partitions. Judith turns and sees him. He sees her smile and quickly signal for him to enter. His heartbeat could short-circuit the entire territory, if that were still possible.

He enters the small windowed room. Judith has resumed her position behind the telescope. A soft, somber melody plays quietly on a high-fidelity machine restored by the powers of Link de Nova. Judith adores watching the sky to music. Gabriel recognizes Gorecki's third symphony.

Judith seems very intent on her telescope. Gabriel senses that she is looking at something important, maybe something she has never seen before.

"Are you still studying the lunar colonies?" he asks.

"No. For a few days now I've been watching what happens in the Ring."

Link has a strange premonition. Very vague, like a wavering needle pointing at a dim dot of light in an immense sea of darkness, as big as a world.

She's watching what happens in the Ring. He doesn't know what that is yet, but at bottom it doesn't matter very much. It has been twelve years since all communication between the Earth and its various space colonies was cut. They say the Ring and the lunar stations were preserved from the Fall. They say it is, of course, impossible for anyone to come down from the Ring, unless he doesn't wish to go back up again.

They say a lot of things. But they know almost nothing.

"What is happening, exactly?" he asks eventually.

Judith tears herself away from the telescope and sits, back straight, across from him. It is an attitude of entirely unconscious provocation; her breasts are naturally high beneath the black sweater where her ebony hair gracefully falls; her waist curves in a perfect wave along her spinal column. Her long legs sketch a double curve in a pair of vintage blue jeans dating from before the Fall. She lights up the room with her beauty more brightly than if a supernova had exploded in the heavens; she projects an aura of sensuality and pure intelligence without the slightest ostentation. It is just her; it is just how she is made.

Which makes it worse, of course.

"That's just it; I don't know yet. Movement, a lot of movement. Stations that were isolated before are coming together; others are forming bigger clusters. Do you want to see?"

He does.

He presses his eye to the telescope's eyepiece and watches the slow ballet of metallic, luminous spheres approximately 450 kilometers above the Earth. Spacecraft co-orbit, form pairs, triads, quartets, complete orchestras.

They turn around one another, come together, then break off toward other clusters. He must admit that in the three years Judith has been letting him into her observatory, he has never seen so much activity up there.

The Ring is transforming. And it has something to do with what is happening here, below, on Earth.

“Have you been able to send anything over the shortwave radio? And more importantly, have you received any more messages?” Link points a finger at a large military-green box atop a concrete pilaster not far from the telescope.

“Communications are terribly poor, and it isn’t getting any better with time. I lose contact more and more often, and for longer and longer at a stretch. It’s been three days since the machine sent a looped message, and nothing has come from up there. At least I’m not picking anything up. Anything at all.”

Link is silent. In the space of a few months, with this small military shortwave radio equipped with a GPS module, they had been able to prove to the community of HNV that there were still ways to communicate, even if only briefly, with the Ring. It was excellent news, and brought new hope to many hearts. But the poor quality and rarity of the transmissions quickly cooled people’s enthusiasm. It still seems inconceivable, at any rate, that a space exploration program toward the Ring might be relaunched. It is probably unthinkable that people living in orbit, sheltered from the Fall, would suddenly want to come bury themselves in one of the vast deserts overtaking the Earth, among dead or dying machines.

Rescue expeditions only work if you take someone away from where he was.

They had managed to transmit for ten or fifteen minutes per month on average, with the same amount of time for receiving, and, as Judith had remarked, it tended to be less than that.

The *thing* is not unaware of the transmissions, Link tells himself. Just as it is not unaware of what has been happening in the Ring for the last few days.

Just as, indeed, it is not unaware of anything.

The next morning, Link de Nova is awakened by a noise coming from his parents’ mobile home. Voices. Exclamations of joy and surprise. Laughter.

He sits up in bed and recognizes the voice of his father, who must be talking from the metal steps outside the mobile home's front door to someone still inside. "It leaves tomorrow, or in two days at the most. Sydia, have you thought of a place where we can store all of it?"

Link cannot hear the response clearly, but he recognizes his mother's voice, her crystalline laugh.

His mother. The android.

She has told him many times how she found him, a baby, under the Deadlink interchange, during the passage through the area of a group of refugees from Canada. It was the day after October 4th, in the early morning.

State-of-the-art androids of that time possessed practically all the biological necessities for reproduction, but a Metastructure directive had suspended the final decryption of the pseudogenetic code. Fourth-generation androids, though endowed with all the necessary genitalia, had thus remained ontologically sterile, and now that the Metastructure is dead there is no longer even the slightest hope that sophisticated technology might "decipher" their bioblocking nanoprocessors. And not a chance that new androids will ever be designed and manufactured on Earth.

The android species, these semiartificial, seminatural creatures made of carbon and silicon, will probably be extinct by the end of this century or the beginning of the next, at the very latest. It will be the most rapid mass biological disappearance ever seen in the entire history of the planet, his mother told him once.

Since then, he has never been able to stop thinking about that terrible factoring: the androids, directly and totally connected to the Metastructure, died very fast and in great numbers during the First Fall. Most of the survivors were eradicated six years later by the Second.

They say there are still a few groups and individual survivors here and there, but everyone knows—even in this place where knowledge has all but disappeared—that there is something worse than the fate of the last humans on this Earth of the Post-Machine. There is the fate of the first posthumanity, created by the previous one. There is the fate of the Creature of the Creature.

"Just before the First Fall," his mother had told him, "there must have been more than a million androids of all generations functioning. I believe around one-hundredth of them lived permanently in orbit; they must have

survived the Cataclysm. As for the others, down here, the ratio is the same—around ten thousand of us survived. One thousand, maybe. One percent of the global population, at the most.”

“You survived too, Mama,” he had said at the time. “You’re part of the one percent.”

His mother had not replied; she had merely gazed at him, her eyes full of tenderness. Even though he knew she wasn’t his biological mother any more than his father was his father, through this kind of simple thing—a regard, a gesture, not even a word—the reality, more strange than painful, had eventually been erased, or had at least become nothing more than a bit of mechanical information among the other basic mechanisms in his mind.

This woman is his mother. And she is one of the few androids still living.

This man is his father. And he is one of the last men to possess a library.

The rest doesn’t matter.

Or so he believes.

Zarkovsky looks at Djordjevic’s young son with undisguised interest. Gabriel Link de Nova, adopted son of a doctor of theology and a fourth-generation female android. Discovered in a box on the morning after the Cataclysm, aged eight days even though he had been born the night before, at the exact time of the Fall. A living paradox.

He had heard the story from the mouth of Djordjevic himself. He had had a hard time believing it at first, but the boy’s father had shown him indubitable proof.

The young man returns the Professor’s gaze unblinkingly. *A bit of hardness in his soul*, thinks Zarkovsky. So much the better. The Post-Metastructure won’t exactly be a party.

Since the evening before, when Gabriel Link de Nova’s parents explained to him exactly what he would be finding here in this “sanctuary,” a question has not stopped tormenting him, like a red-hot iron plunged into flesh grown soft with certainty.

Right now the boy undoubtedly has certain predispositions, but couldn’t one try to implement a specific training program, one that would make his powers even more efficient?

Can he imagine a way to optimize his gifts—for example, by extending their topological reach? For the moment, Gabriel represents only a

microlocal response to the Thing-World. What can they do so that he might act on if not a global scale—which is of course out of the question—at least a regional one, or something of that size?

Zarkovsky has no idea whether he might one day be able to provide replies to these questions, but in the meantime there is no doubt that the young man holds his fair share of both mystery and discovery. He illuminates at the same time as he obscures; he has many responses at the same time as he raises problematic, unfathomable uncertainties.

For example, the brief exchange that just took place between them:

“If you can stimulate general remission in machines and modified humans, it’s clear that you cannot continue to act as if this were a simple small business, you and your friends. We talked about it with your father yesterday, and he is in agreement with me on this point.”

“I know,” Link responded dryly. “And you ... there are so many things you don’t know. As for my father, whom I would hate to offend and in spite of all the respect I have for him, he is still unaware of many things as well.”

“Your father is having a library sent from Italy that will help us to complete our knowledge and to—”

“You don’t understand—either that, or you aren’t listening to me.” Link de Nova cut him off abruptly. “I know about the library. I said, you and my father don’t know very much. And, as it happens, my friends do.”

“What do you want to say, my boy?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Link saw his father turn pale. He knew Gabriel was never wrong—and, moreover, that he never lied. Except in the case of his nocturnal wanderings, his visits to the beautiful Judith. But not in this type of discussion. Not about anything having to do with his two friends from Junkville. Not where the entity that threatened them all was concerned.

“I don’t want to say anything to *you*, but I think you would do well to have a serious talk with my two friends. *Very* serious. A series of incidents is happening in the Territory. Things only they are qualified to talk to you about.”

He had the impression that he had already said too much. But he added: “Things are also happening in the Ring, and I think it’s all connected.”

But neither Yuri nor Campbell was aware of this last bit of information. He had better wait, he thought, and talk to them in person.

Fixing the Professor’s gaze with his own, he fell silent.

The man stared at him like a scientist who had just discovered a new species of beetle, or orchid, or meteoritic quartz.

Zarkovsky knows, now, how very right he was to come here, to cross the entire mid-American desert to reach this “sanctuary.”

Here, it seems as if they are in the eye of the hurricane. He can’t explain why, but he is beginning to think that this place, this Territory, this cosmodrome, has a particular relationship, not with the Metastructure, which he already knows, but with its end, with what people call the “Fall.”

He is beginning to realize that close ties will bind—do bind—already bind—the library that is about to leave Europe and the singular existence of Link de Nova in the very place it will arrive.

The bonds are not immediately apparent. What, in this world, can pride itself on being apparent as well as so important? What is apparent in this world is not even nothingness, like black holes, which are visible as “hollows” via the destruction they wreak on all matter, all light. What is apparent is only appearance.

What is apparent bears such a close resemblance to what it is supposed to hide! It is a perfect copy, in fact. The desert, for example. One might say that it was created “in the image of the Post-Metastructure,” just as Man was made in the image of God.

Djordjevic’s library contains many secrets—but secrets that are not sealed in some forgotten dungeon or behind the smoke and mirrors of a *Da Vinci Code*, or concealed by some other perfumed mystic catering to the tastes of people who read cultural supplements, the ones responsible for the glory days of this vanished art that used to be called “literature.” The secrets are contained in books that are neither prohibited nor lost, even if some of them might, in a pinch, be considered rarities.

They are secret books because it has been more than a century since anyone read them.

There was no need for a directive from the Metastructure; no public prohibition was ever issued, except maybe in the Islamic emirates, where, after all, even a blank cassette tape would be burned in the streets.

Djordjevic’s books simply did not interest twenty-first-century society. And they probably held very little fascination in previous years either.

When he had been obligated to leave Trieste, a hunted man in extremis, a few months before the Fall, as the neo-Islamist assault on the city reached its zenith, his library was already nearly to Rome.

He had put his twelve thousand books before his own life.

The only problem is that he also put them before the lives of his wife and daughter.

PART TWO

One of the universal sources of the sublime is the infinite, in as much as it can be distinguished from the vastness. It tends to fill the mind with that sort of delicious horror that is the most authentic effect and the best criteria of the sublime. But as there are many objects of which the eye cannot perceive the borders, they appear infinite and produce the same effects as if they really were so. We are fooled in the same way when an object contains an infinite number of elements, in such a way that the imagination encounters nothing that might prevent it from adding it to its liking.

—EDMUND BURKE

Today, though the universal law of the machine is accepted, we must not forget that camps may prefigure the destiny of a world that adopts their structure. Machines that have been updated impose the same law. According to this logic, man must be interpreted as a computer, and that is not possible unless he is translated into numbers. The Devil is a number and transformed into numbers. However, God has a name and calls us by our names. He is the person and seeks the person.

—JOSEPH RATZINGER

17 > *SIGN OF THE TIMES*

When the sky splits in two that day, splits into vast monochrome sections torn by the storm, metal-clad gray-blue meteors falling in a shower to the Earth, the frigid wind blows in from the northwest, from what remains of the Arctic. What remains is still sufficient, when conditions permit, to create one-hundred-kilometer-per-hour blizzards from Quebec to Nova Scotia.

Temperatures fell sharply during the night; it is far below zero now. Even in January, this is unusual. The storm turned rapidly into a “powder factory,” a storm of whirling snow that swept the Territory like a polar armada.

The desert. The blizzard. South, west, north, east. A force seems to be coalescing all its energy against the Territory.

Yuri, who has been tormented by this thought several times already, thumbs through a book on cellular biochemistry while Chrysler oils his guns.

Neither books nor guns will be much help to us now, Yuri thinks. The *thing* is coming from somewhere, even if that somewhere is very close to the Nothingness. It is a sort of copy of it; it exists as such, maybe as a kind of *negative* form, a place from where the thing is planning its proliferation. It wants a body, certainly; it wants a world, all right—but it comes from somewhere; it possesses a niche. It lives within something, its primordial habitat, temporary though it might be. And, probably because it has left the Nothingness for this primordial habitat, it has developed a taste for it; now it wants something better. Something more. It wants to be a world. It wants to be the very body of Humanity.

No—neither books, even those that Djordjevic is having sent from Europe, nor guns, even the ones Chrysler takes such meticulous care of—no, none of it can really stand in the way of the *thing*. The *thing* that is becoming the World.

Yuri's book lies unheeded in his lap for long minutes.

The conclusion is undeniable. If the *thing* is becoming the World, if it is transforming the former Earth into a Post-World dedicated to the Post-Machine in ontological principle, only an *anti-thing* would be capable of stopping it.

This *anti-thing* must then, by definition, be *human*. And at the same time it must, in its absolute entirety, be an *Anti-World*.

Even Link de Nova, thinks Yuri, falls short of that mark.

We all fall very short of the mark.

We are all grains of sand, and It is the storm. We are snowflakes, and It is the blizzard.

The *thing* should not be underestimated. It definitely deserves the initial capital letter that he sees in his mind when he thinks about it.

It has no name, but It devours all names. It has no substance, and It transforms into numbers what used to be the substance of the human bodies whose language It has digitalized.

It is as powerful as a whole World.

They are all as weak as insects in the face of it.

This kind of blizzard might last for days. The last one he can remember happened during the year following the death of the Metastructure.

Snowdrifts measuring up to two meters in height are massing all over the territory, covering the desert and its sand dunes, piling up on the arid plains and savannas covered with *Cornus canadensis*, sumac, orange hawkweed, phragmites, viperine and white snakewort, a constellation of frozen drifts and vast snowy tundras leaving only rare clumps frozen in place, the trees that survived the drought suddenly repainted with a layer of frost.

Even more than last month's sandstorm, the blizzard will take its share of victims from the Territory. Certainly several dozen homeless, and poorly protected families in their fragile and unsanitary makeshift huts.

The snow and the sand come together here, in the Territory, in a sooty union. The snow will be quickly blackened by the coal on the hills of southern Junkville, and when it melts it will form lakes of silica in vast expanses of mud. The *thing* has truly started a process; the events are linking together with the icy causal logic of machinery.

The blizzard didn't happen by chance.

The Professor just arrived.

And the library is coming, too.

The “second mutation” that transforms men into numeric data has gained speed exponentially over the past few days, reached proportions that have brought even Chrysler Campbell out of his habitual reserve.

The blizzard didn’t happen by chance. It didn’t come alone. The Thing is preparing for an attack of enormous magnitude.

The blizzard is a sign.

Now they are at war against the World as it is. Their visible enemies are countless, above all in the geological scheme, because it is this World that the Thing wants to transform into its own habitat.

But the Thing itself will most likely remain invisible. It will act on those pieces of the World that it has directly brought into its own service, for its “personal” use. It will remain out of public view, behind the scenes, under the table, backstage, watching its work play out.

The image is striking; it is so redoubtable, so meaningful, so blinding, so utterly devoid of illusion.

These “pieces of the world” that the Thing will manipulate like a theater director into serving it will not, of course, be trees, or combustion engines, or quartz watches, or adjustable wrenches.

They will be men.

Simple human beings.

Like him, and Chrysler.

Like any of the Territory’s inhabitants.

The blizzard is a sign. It is saying that winter will never end again, even under the hottest sun. The desert itself is a terrestrial blizzard.

The blizzard is a sign, Yuri tells himself again.

A sign that everything has been turned upside down, and will be again.

A sign that we haven’t seen anything yet.

The blizzard fills the earth and the sky for three full days, with intermittent brief periods of relative calm.

On the morning of the fourth day, the silence wakes Yuri even before Campbell is up.

A ray of light is penetrating the cabin through one of the Airbus windows and hits the adjacent wall, where there are two large “first-class” seats scavenged from among the plane crash debris. Chrysler is sleeping deeply on one of them, which has been pulled into a reclining position.

Yuri sees a square of intense blue out each window.

The weather is magnificent. The day promises to be mild and very bright.

The memory of the blizzard will recede, without disappearing altogether. It will remain like a memory of death, like a harbinger, like a grimacing mask in the collective dreams of what remains of the Territory's humanity. It is becoming more and more like a game, a strategy, a trap. It is becoming more and more like a secret war.

After dressing he goes out onto the front steps and gets his first glimpse of the extent and magnitude of the damage left by the three-day blizzard.

In Aircrash Circle alone, two huts that had already suffered from the previous month's huge storm are gone, wiped from the map, leaving nothing but scattered debris and corpses. One body is missing, that of a little girl eight years old. Five other cabins that had barely survived the sandstorm have now been reduced to ruins; one of the inhabitants is dead, crushed by a support structure. There are numerous wounded, some of them undoubtedly in critical condition.

Yuri makes a tour of the area to evaluate the damage and offer help, the Medikit on his back.

The snow, still immaculately white, glitters with a million silvery sparkles in the pale morning light. The sand, yellow as brass, contained the icy explosion with its dune ramparts and the large horizontal shields of the arid steppes.

Yuri remembers his intuition about the geological progression of the process. Not only are snow and sand mingling before mixing with the coal and garbage of Junkville but soon temperatures will return to normal and spring, with its average 30 degrees centigrade, will appear without a pause.

The polymorphous mud created by the mixture of all these deserts will suddenly swallow up the dried-out valleys and the few surviving rivers, likely provoking a series of floods that will engulf the entire Territory.

Everything above ground level will be immediately submerged; the rest will be carried away by landslides.

Snowdrifts are piling up against the sand dunes now, but soon their copulation, and their mingling with the coal dust and recycled garbage of Junkville, will produce a substance that is neither solid nor liquid, neither compressed nor powdery, neither black nor white nor yellow nor purple nor gray.

A material without stable substance or color, a material that will undoubtedly form the substratum and shape that the Thing gives to its New Human World.

Sand and snow, silica and ice, have common properties, thinks Yuri, observing the bicolored landscape that stretches on either side of the road.

Silica and ice cut like tiny natural shurikens. Snow, too, is composed of “grains,” and when conditions permit it can, like sand, reach that semi-liquid state that causes it to rush down mountain slopes at three hundred kilometers an hour.

“I counted thirty-five new cases just before the storm. Thirty-five on top of all the others. There are seventeen in Deadlink, according to my source. We’re entering an explosive phase.”

“How many in total at the moment?” asks Yuri, mechanically.

An enormous, icy snowdrift rears up alongside the road next to him, shining like a diamond meteorite in the sun, still nickel-brilliant in some places, already blackened and dirty in others.

“With the new list we’re at more than a hundred and fifty cases now. We’ve analyzed seventy-two of them.”

“When you say seventy-two, do you mean the cases we’ve been able to follow from beginning to end through the entire process?”

The road curves right, toward the white disk of the sun. Deadlink is only a few kilometers away now.

“No, we’ve only monitored twenty-eight of them in detail, stage by stage. And then another twenty partially, through several stages, and twenty more where we could only establish one biomap, usually the final one.”

“How many dead that we know of? A quarter of them?”

“As of right now, if you go back to our first contact, yeah, that’s about right. Thirty of the cases we only heard about are already dead. And when I talk about our seventy-two analyzed cases, I’m not including the eighteen that have died. We were at ninety not too long ago. It’s been a rocky January.”

Now the road is winding toward the Deadlink plateau. He can see the huge concrete star of the abandoned interchange and the long gray line of the uncompleted portion of the highway.

Deadlink is a township that extends the whole length of this abandoned highway for six or seven kilometers.

The “core” of the system, the uncompleted interchange, thrusts its steel-and-concrete struts skyward near a rocky butte at the bottom of which snakes the trace of a long-dried-out valley. It is the paradoxical off-center center of Deadlink, a linear city that resembles an immense serpent twisting north to south, with the sharp tresses of its star-shaped Gorgon’s head pointing toward each cardinal point.

The highway was, for the most part, built on a system of concrete pillars due to the marshy nature of the terrain in certain places. Planting stilts with integrated jacks had been less expensive than draining and drying the swamps—at the time. If they had waited just a little, the desert would have offered its unremitting services for free.

Masses of refugees had settled on these ten square kilometers and reproduced the natural hierarchy at its most primordial. The elite and their direct servants lived on firm ground, concrete, on high. The various lower strata lived either under the highway (for the intermediate castes) or at the far ends of land vaguely linked to the expressway in one way or another (for the lowest classes).

Twenty-five thousand people. It had rapidly become the most populated township in the Territory, with the exception of the “historic” cities of Grand Junction and Junkville. A human conglomerate where, like everywhere, but with even greater frenzy, everything could be sold, bought, traded, or stolen. A horizontal megamarket, a bazaar crammed onto a piece of Recyclo concrete, a long line of survival supermarkets where men and merchandise alike were arranged according to the particular layout of the highway.

Unlike the Junkville townships, Deadlink specializes in nothing—which means that anything and everything can be found there.

“They’re already there,” Yuri observes.

He can discern several groups of people scattered along the road at first, and as they get closer they see a huge crowd of humans. They are there en masse. There is a lot of capital here. A lot of biological capital. A lot of organs.

They have come from all over Junkville.

He recognizes their uniforms, their logos, their colors. There are the guys from Clockwork Orange County, in orange suits with black eight-branched

crosses on their backs. The ones from Snake Zone, in green uniforms emblazoned with white serpents. He sees the numerous yellow suits of the Triads of Vortex Townships, with their small black-and-white emblems shaped like blocks of public works. There are the characteristic colors of other groups as well, groups that are new on the market, which he has seen only rarely: blue suits with the insignia of biodecontamination printed in red on the breasts and shoulders—the necros from Big Bag Recyclo—and the purple ones, without any visible distinctive signs, of the Autostrada experts. And—where are they from?—men dressed all in black, with yellow hearts on white disks showing on their backs and chests.

Campbell answers his silent question. “They’re brand new in the market. A Triad from Tin Machine.”

“Business is booming, you might say.”

“Yep. The World is booming.”

And as the World of the Thing continues to expand, humanity will be confined more and more narrowly, every day a little more, thinks Yuri.

Every day their chances are less. Every day their hope is less. Every day their will to fight is less.

He knows it; as the weeks have passed, it has practically become mechanical. They are continuing their investigation, but they both know that it is a complete waste.

As long as Link de Nova hasn’t found a way to stop this new mutation of the Thing, they will just be men living on borrowed time, like all the others, going about their daily business.

We really are the Camp Doctors. We have stopped paying attention to statistics. We have stopped paying attention to numbers. We are simply gathering data for the records.

What they see at Deadlink is repeated all over the Territory. The necro Triads are out in force. The new “digital infection” is no longer only a rumor; the whole south of the Territory is full of new cases, every day, every hour, every minute. The Triads are constantly on call and at work, all the way to Monolith Hills in the north.

During all this time, the breakdown rate of bio-implants and transgenic organs continues to increase.

And to this, the blizzard has added its own morbid count.

Pleurisy, pneumonia, hypothermia, various strains of the flu, bronchitis, serious sinusitis—any of it may swoop down at any moment to convey you to a body bag, prettily decorated with the colors of the Triad that comes to take care of your corpse.

In the midst of the unmoving dual-toned sand-snow, the multicolored activity of the necro Triads looks like a circus act—like those he saw one day on one of Chrysler’s digidiscs. The necros are everywhere, all over Deadlink, even at the cabin of Yuri and Chrysler’s informant there, a member of the upper classes who lived in a UManHome capsule almost at the very edge of the unfinished highway. Then, in the afternoon, the “Camp Doctors” seek seventeen new cases there. Find eleven. Are able to analyze only nine.

The moving polychromy of these recycling agents of death is nothing less than fascinating. It is like a parody of the whole World in its configuration, like a luminous shadow. Jesters of the King. The Desert King. The Blizzard King. The King Thing.

They feel as if they are the only living beings in that desert of sand and ice.

Maybe they are, thinks Yuri.

The sun is sinking when they take Nexus Road to the north. Chrysler, arriving at the intersection with Row 299, the most direct route to the former city of Neon Park, stops the car, calmly and in utter silence. Yuri does not speak. Chrysler stares fixedly toward the east, toward what was once the city of transformists, the city of body tuning, the acropolis of an electronuclear god.

Yuri finds a Roxy Music cassette, *For Your Pleasure*, in the pickup’s glove compartment. It seems to fit the situation perfectly.

Nights clothed in velvet and silver lamé under the cold glare of neon light; cities illuminated in full futuristic flamboyance; haute couture gowns draping purely filmic creatures; a black panther on a leash; electric guitars crossed on the body of a supermodel.

A world that disappeared long before he was born.

Long before his parents were born.

A world that seems more distant now than the most remote ages of human history, a century that seems to have been bypassed by its own past.

“Do you know why they want to see us?”

Chrysler has just started the car again, wordlessly. He gives no explanation for stopping at the intersection of Row 299.

“I got a call from Link de Nova. There’s a big meeting. It’s important. They want to see us, that’s all I know. But it’s about something you have doubts about, apparently.”

The library, thinks Yuri. That’s it. The library must be nearing Halifax.

“I mean,” Campbell corrects himself instinctively, “that it’s probably about what’s been happening over the past three months in the territory.”

Maybe the Professor has finally heard about the latest epidemic, thinks Yuri. They have been concealing it from him—but now they have stores of analytical data built up. They can conduct an authentic statistical study.

Of course, it might all lead to nothing.

Chrysler answers his unspoken question, as he so often does. “Sheriff Langlois knows all about it, especially what’s going on in Monolith Hills. There have been cases up there—fewer than in Junkville, but enough, I think, that his informant told him about it. He may have kept the secret; maybe not.”

“If they want to see us, it has something to do with the Thing. If by any chance they still don’t know about the second mutation and the epidemic explosion going on, I think we should tell them about it first thing.”

“Yes,” answers Chrysler, simply.

They come into view of the intersection with North Junction Road, which leads to the northern end of the strip and then to a side road connected to Apollo Drive, down near the cosmodrome. An updraft causes swarms of tumbleweeds to whirl among the rows and slopes.

This time it is Yuri who instinctively turns his head in a specific direction, as if drawn by an irresistible magnetic force. He watches the strip for as long as he can, then follows it with his eyes in the rearview mirror until it disappears into the distance behind them.

They cross the border of the county of Heavy Metal Valley. The rocky spine of Xenon Ridge, which marks the county’s southern entry point, rises a few kilometers ahead of them.

Almost immediately, Yuri sees blue-and-white patrol cars sparkling in the sun. Waiting, patiently, for them.

The icy snowdrifts become interspersed with rock, sand, arid ochre earth, patches of skin-irritating weeds, thorny bushes, and a few hardy shrubs.

Hot, cold, ice, fire, desert, ice floes, sand, snow, unnatural nature, dehumanized machines, demechanized humans. It's all there. All the signs are present.

All the signs indicate that the real Cataclysm hasn't truly happened yet.

All the signs indicate that it is extremely near.

All the signs indicate that no one will be able to perceive its true form.

All the signs indicate that no one will even know it is happening.

18 > *TITANIUM EXPOSÉ*

The two patrol cars pull away from the city's southern entry to let them pass through to the other side of the high wall made of crushed metal carcasses, stacked in steel columns several meters thick.

Slade Orange Vernier, the deputy sheriff, yells out the open car window to them: "Bulldozer Park! The sheriff's waiting for you there. You know the way, boys."

They know the way. Bulldozer Park's heavy metal cracks under the sun, which is reddening as it sinks behind the horizon. The sheriff is indeed waiting for them there.

Everything is in order. Everything is according to procedure. Everything respects the Law of Heavy Metal Valley.

"They're down there, in Djordjevic's mobile home. It's a 'scientific' meeting. I'm not formally invited, so you'll have a break."

Wilbur Langlois is standing in the center of Bulldozer Park. He gestures vaguely to the northeast of the metallic city.

Chrysler isn't familiar with the residence of Link de Nova's parents. Yuri has been there two or three times. "I'll be able to find it, Sheriff," he says.

"My status as sheriff gives me the right to invite myself, you understand. But I've got a long day ahead of me."

As if to confirm his words, a noise is heard from the other side of the park. Voices. The sound of an engine. A big engine. A truck. A huge truck, thinks Yuri.

The tanker truck slowly appears from between two rows of concrete mixers, accompanied by several men who walk alongside it, dressed in old firefighters' uniforms from the city of Grand Junction.

It is a powerful 450-horsepower Kenworth painted in the colors of the Republic of Alberta, which, like all other nations, has now vanished—but its oil wells have not, nor have its refineries, nor its tanker trucks.

The enormous oblong vehicle rolls to a stop in a large parking place on the periphery of the park. Chrysler and Yuri then watch several pickup trucks towing small tankers of two or three thousand liters drive toward the Alberta Kenworth. Pumps, pipes, and pressure controllers are quickly extracted from the small trucks, and in a few minutes all the equipment needed to transfer fuel is put in place by the HMTV teams.

The Albertans themselves have not lifted a finger; they are rooted in the seats of their vehicles and mostly asleep. They have traveled thousands of kilometers across central Canada with a cargo of refined fuel, and undoubtedly a very strict deadline to keep. It is as heroic as crossing an ocean with a medieval library.

“Gasoline is becoming rare in the territory,” remarks Campbell. “The stores at Reservoir Can in Junkville are already half empty. How are you doing this? What are you paying them with?”

Sheriff Langlois plants his night-black gaze directly on the young bounty hunter’s. There is no animosity in it, but no friendliness, either. Not even indifference. It is simply the eye of the Law of Bronze, Yuri thinks. Just the eye that surveys, that controls, that makes sure all security procedures are respected.

It is the eye that sees everything because it does not focus on any one thing in particular.

The eye of Heavy Metal Valley.

“Humvee is full of resources. All you have to do is look around you, Mr. Campbell. And to know how to choose.”

“Gasoline-powered cars? Are you trading your cars for fuel?”

The sheriff cracks a sort of smile. It is like the firing pin of a gun being pulled up. “We’ve improved a lot of these vehicles since the Fall. Their communities of origin fell back on the basic designs. We often add hybrid systems, ethanol fuel cells, sometimes hydrogen or deuterium engines, when we can find them.”

“That gives me a better understanding of how you created your sacred brigade of patrol cars,” says Campbell dryly. “Tell me—aren’t you doing business with Junkville?”

The sheriff’s face closes a little. “Why the question, Campbell? Are you buying?”

“There’s been an influx of gasoline-powered and converted cars for the past two years or so into Junkville, Sheriff Langlois. Especially in the rich

townships. Vortex, Little Congo, Tin Machine. You'll even see red Buicks from the very beginning of the century in perfect condition."

Oh, shit, thinks Yuri. Chrysler has just hit the nail on the head, as usual. The sheriff himself is trafficking, like everyone in the territory. He's trafficking for his community, for Heavy Metal Valley. But he's trafficking.

Trafficking for the Law.

Wilbur Langlois shifts his gaze to Yuri. "You know how to get to Djordjevic's?"

Yuri nods.

"So quit wasting time. They're waiting for you."

The odor of high-octane gasoline wafts through the fresh, still evening air. The pipes pump their hectoliters of fuel, emitting groans and sighs from their giant mechanical esophagi.

Wilbur Langlois observes the scene, immobile as a statue. He is simply monitoring to ensure that the procedure goes smoothly.

He is monitoring the Law of his city.

And the Law of the city is monitoring him.

When they have gathered in the central section of the Winnebago, Chrysler and Yuri take careful stock of the situation according to the same mutual, instinctive impulse, each of them knowing the other is doing the same thing. We work together, with a shared system, thinks Yuri, holding back a smile as he sits down in an old, scavenged armchair with a faded, barely discernable pattern of Scottish tartan on it, worn by several generations of users.

Milan Djordjevic is there, and his son, Gabriel Link de Nova.

The mother is there: the baptized android, Sydia Nova.

Professor Zarkovsky is there.

And there is a pair of almost-violet eyes, a simple glance from which can melt you like a dirty iceberg on the side of the road.

Judith Sevigny.

Goddamn, she's beautiful, Yuri cannot stop himself from thinking. He turns his head quickly away from her. A little too beautiful, maybe.

Chrysler maintains the appearance of a living computer, but Yuri's practiced gaze can pick out dozens of tiny details proving that he, too—despite his glacial irony and his cool, mechanical reason—he too, yes,

Chrysler Campbell, the Territory's premier bounty hunter, is melting like a snowball beneath the extraordinary beauty of this face, this form, this aura.

She's barely seventeen years old, Yuri muses. When she's my age, the man who manages to seduce her will be the happiest one alive. Even if all of humanity vanishes into a global desert, it would be a blessing just to live with her, alone, in the middle of nowhere, anywhere.

"It's been a long time since we last saw each other," says Djordjevic by way of an opening.

"I think that's what we're going to be talking about a bit later. We've been working like dogs this month," Chrysler replies coolly.

"Working? But you haven't been here once since—"

"The end of December. We know, Mr. Djordjevic. We'll explain ourselves, I told you. But according to your son, you're the one who wanted to see us."

"Exactly."

"So you're in luck. We're here. We're listening to you."

Zarkovsky steps in. His face is worried, Yuri notes, and so is Djordjevic's. A problem with the library?

"Around a week ago, Sheriff Langlois held a special Council meeting. A restricted meeting. Only members of his team were invited."

"Well, that's his prerogative, I believe."

"He increased security drastically, but didn't want to tell us why. He talked to us about the gasoline convoy coming in from Alberta, but it seemed like even he didn't believe it would really happen."

Chrysler and Yuri look at each other from the corners of their eyes. The sheriff knows. His informant in Monolith Hills did her work. But Wilbur Langlois had decided to keep the information secret.

Yuri and Chrysler realize that they anticipated the sheriff's reaction perfectly.

They calculated it.

They guessed it.

They preempted the sheriff on his own turf.

"Listen," says Chrysler, "Sheriff Langlois' regulations don't interest me very much. We didn't come all the way across the Territory for a lecture on HMTV civil code. So please, let's get to the point."

"A month ago, Gabriel"—Zarkovsky gestures toward the young man with his chin—"told us you have crucial information about the postmortem

mutation of the Metastructure. We think the sheriff knows about at least some of it as well. And we think it's time for us to stop being treated like children."

"You want me to speak frankly to you, Professor? Despite your great knowledge, you are like children here. You are the ones who are in desperate need of information here, not us. Even Mr. Djordjevic has left Heavy Metal Valley very rarely. We're the Territory specialists here."

"I recognize that, but I must say that we—Djordjevic and myself—are specialists in what Gabriel has told us you call the 'Thing.'"

"You designed the Metastructure, yes, but the Thing is not the Metastructure."

"That's true, but it comes from it. We are in a very good position to understand what's currently happening."

"If you're so advanced, why do you need to bring a library all the way across the Atlantic?"

"You don't know anything about the library."

"And you don't seem to know anything about the North Atlantic. I don't see at all how the library is going to help us fight the Thing, but I'm ready to be convinced."

"We already talked about this, at Pluto Saint-Clair's house, a month ago. How can I explain to you the content of those books when you don't have even the slightest reference point to go on?"

"Stop taking us for idiots," growls Yuri, to his own great surprise. "Maybe we have only vague knowledge of Christian mysticism, but—believe it or not—we are capable of understanding what is explained to us."

There is a moment's hesitation. Yuri can almost hear the wheels turning furiously in the others' brains.

"Okay. Fine," says Zarkovsky, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "You want a taste of a biblical parable? How about the fact that the Four Beasts of the Apocalypse, heralded by the Four Horsemen, spawned each other according to—fittingly—devilish laws, created to invest Evil with a quality forbidden to it by nature."

"What quality?" asks Chrysler.

"The beasts reproduce by destroying each other. Call it the autophagy of Evil. Evil is the inversion of the divine Tetragram," puts in Djordjevic, in his soft, almost feminine voice. "So it is impossible; it is pure nothingness. It is through man that it achieves its paradoxical existence, because it is by

believing in it that man gives it its impulsion in the world, because man has the divinely ordained choice to open up to light and spirit or to turn toward shadow and corruption. But Evil is also finite; it cannot be infinite, because only God can be that. To get around this problem, as we see with the Metastructure, it *loops back indefinitely on itself*. But let's get back to our four Beasts. Back, for a moment, to eschatology! The first Beast can be considered the grandmother, the original template. We can think of the entire twentieth century as a complete summarization of a long descent."

"Okay," sighs Campbell. "First Beast, twentieth century."

"The Control Metastructure was tested for the first time on April 4, 2027, after a dozen years of intensive research." The Professor takes up the thread again. "Its introduction on the market was announced two years later, after some final modifications. In 2030, it was installed as coordinator of United Nations agencies. In 2032, when the Second American Civil War had just begun, it invoked an emergency prerogative to transform the United Nations into a decision-making body of which it was the 'planner.' That was done in January of the following year, and thus UHU was created. It lasted barely a quarter of a century. The second Beast, then, is the Metastructure. It comes from and goes back to the twentieth century. The third Beast is the disappearance of the Metastructure, its own death. In view of its configuration as a Machine-World, its death was immensely active, and its breakdown killed a large part of the human race. And now, since '63, we have been seeing what succeeded it. The fourth Beast. The postmortem phase, the transmutative one. Its 'superdeath.' This metavirus that is a World, a whole World that is substituting itself for what humanity has lived in until now."

Yuri holds back a smile. Except for the "biblical parables," he knows all of this. He has known it since his meeting with Link de Nova. He knows more than this, in fact. A lot more.

"But I want to be sure you understand this essential element," continues the Professor. "Djordjevic made me aware of it thirteen years ago. The Apocalypse, just like Genesis and the rest of the Bible, cannot be read through a rationalist magnifying glass—meaning, as a story that follows a linear chronology. The Scriptures do not only describe; they act, they interact with Man, and with Creation. Neither can we consider the 'events' they relate as isolated points on a unidirectional time line. Or, more exactly, this line exists; this linear narration exists, but among a multitude of

surplices, a multiplex of dimensions, a 'hypersphere' that contains the World and is thus always at work, just as it reproduces itself in the causal chain as determined and determining isolates. This linear chronology is at best a diagonal road. The Beasts of the Apocalypse and the Antichrist are not only present in each period of History, they are present at the heart of our existence. Simply, special 'impulsions' take place wherein the forces of Evil coalesce and take true root in the real world, on the scale of nations, or empires, or what has succeeded them since. We are experiencing a new 'genitive' convergence of the Antichrist, but this time it seems that it is being announced as such, as the final one from an eschatological point of view, the one that will lead to the destruction of Humanity, but also to its salvation through the coming of Christ.

"This final impulsion will recapitulate all the history that came before it—I mean the history recounted by the Scriptures. There will be Genesis and Apocalypse, Revelation and Darkening, all at once. You will see that we haven't had the last of our surprises. You will see that everything is going to turn around, several times yet."

Yuri looks attentively at Zarkovsky. Hasn't he come to similar conclusions, all by himself?

"Good. Very good, we admit it. How can these events be at once simultaneous and in linear progression in time?" asks Chrysler, as if pushed beyond any defensive logical position.

"First, you have to accept that everything in the Bible is interlaced according to the divine code," Djordjevic answers. "Which means, for example, that we can find the same signs at several levels of reality. Thus the Four Beasts of the Apocalypse are constantly to be seen by man, but at different levels of perception."

"Exactly," agrees Zarkovsky. "So, on the historical scale, we have the following procession: First 'Gnostic-Islamic' Antichrist, in the form of Multiduplicities, false Prophets of the One God, from Marcion to Muhammad. Second 'modernist' Antichrist, transformation of History into neo-Messianism. Reform, Bourgeoisie, Revolutions, Atheism, Totalitarianism. Man-God without God. Third 'postmodernist' Antichrist, one might even say 'posthistoric'—the Metastructure. Biopolitical demiurge, inverted uniqueness based on the general atomization of all transcendence.

“The fourth Beast, unknown, ‘hidden’ and thus ‘revealed,’ is the devolutionary summarization of the first three. This is the current entity. What you so picturesquely call the ‘Post-Machine,’ according to Gabriel.

...

“At the same time, on the genetic scale of the Metastructure itself, we see the procession repeat itself: The Metastructure as the first Beast. Its death, the ‘Fall,’ as the second Beast. The postmortem mutation of ’63 as the third Beast. Now we have only to await the fourth.”

Yuri and Chrysler share a glance, a spark of pure complicity.

Zarkovsky is truly unaware of what is most important.

“It’s useless to wait. It’s already here, Professor. And that’s what the sheriff didn’t want to tell you about—and what we came here to discuss.”

Chrysler speaks these words as casually as if he is talking about the weather, but in his eyes Yuri can see the brilliance of an exploding world.

“I’ll explain. It’s a bit complicated, but you’ll get the hang of it. We have detailed bioanalyses of ninety cases from our initial list, which contains around a hundred and twenty. Of these ninety cases, eighteen are already dead; so there are only seventy-two cases still living in which we have a complete dynamic map of the process. But a dozen more of these hundred and twenty cases, for whom we only have information about onset or partial data, have also died. The nine cases analyzed today belong to a second list of thirty-five recently reported cases. In total we have noted exactly one hundred fifty-six cases in the whole southern part of the territory. This is how we operate: Cases are reported by one of our expert sources, with at least one cross-check. Then the cases are located, preferably down to the exact address, and preliminary contact made. If possible, we do a first analysis. Then, cases analyzed, all of them that wish to let us operate. We have pinpointed four phases of the phenomenon and a sort of ‘post-phase’ that isn’t yet death, but its planning, or some manifestation close to it. The hardest thing has been to model the evolutionary dynamic of the process. With the cases recently reported but which actually existed before, and those that really belong to a new ‘strain’—the quantum calculator Link repaired for us has come in handy, believe me—we believe we can now confirm that the number of individuals infected is doubling or tripling every month.”

The Professor jerks violently upright in his chair. “But—good God, what are you talking about? We don’t understand a single word you’re saying!”

Yuri can tell the Professor means what he says. The faces of Djordjevic, Link, Judith Seigny, and even the baptized android show nothing but consternation and astonishment, and pure incomprehension.

We really talk like Camp Doctors, he thinks. *We give statistics, data, numbers, and ratios even before simply explaining what is happening. Even before talking about what is happening to people.*

Chrysler is silent, his face pale, features frozen as if there is a blizzard raging inside him. He has just been stopped cold in his élan as never before.

Yuri takes a deep breath. “There is a postmortem ‘second mutation’ in progress, Professor. A little like the one in 2063, except that this one attacks neither the mechanical nor the biological.”

“What, then?” asks Zarkovsky, raising an eyebrow.

“It attacks the symbolic, Professor. It attacks human language.”

There are many events that are, by nature, unforeseeable, and against which we are more or less powerless. Rarer are those that are foreseeable but for which prior knowledge changes none of the consequences. Events about which absolutely nothing can be done.

Events that are perfectly foreseeable—perhaps even planned—and thus unavoidable.

Which is exactly what happens during this evening of January 25, a date that none of those present in the mobile home will ever be able to forget.

True alliances are not necessarily made; it is even the contrary, with exaggerated manifestations of feeling, ostentatious effusions of friendship, serious and sententious words, dramatic and hieratic attitudes, or vulgar protestations of friendship. Alliances are not born over glasses of vintage champagne or a case of top-quality beer.

They are forged by fire. In steel. In words. In the sharing of the deepest secrets.

They are forged because the furnace is hot, whether you have planned it or not; their coals are incandescent, glowing from red to white, and everything is leading to the gaping maw that melts iron.

Yuri’s simple words *it attacks human language* cause this sort of accident. The ontological accident. The collision. The *aircrash*. The circle.

The furnace. The fire that melts iron.

That sentence causes the event. And like any event, it rises up out of the silence and then returns instantly to it.

Nothing more is said for long moments.

It is the silence that seals the word. It is the starting point, the pivotal one, of everything they are, and everything they will become.

Everyone. Each of them, in his own way.

None of them can escape what we are starting, Yuri thinks. We will be part of the experience to the very end. No one can get out now. Now it's too late. Now we have all gone over to the other side. Now all of us, here—we *know*.

The sentence gives rise to other sentences. Chrysler is finally able to pick up the thread of his narrative, colder than a medicolegal report. He describes the various phases of the process. He describes the “post-phase,” when the patient can no longer emit anything but digital noise, vomiting out his own substance in numeric form. He describes the strange postmortem “anti-phase,” when, though the physical body is decomposed in some part, any part, a digital reconfiguration of this same body “takes shape,” but in the form of diagrams, codes, and numbers in what was the primordial habitat of the victim. They have seen it many times. All the tests, all the biopsies, analyses, statistics, and even some video recordings are available at their house in Aircrash Circle. Then Yuri speaks about the parallel “Thing” that is now attacking even the simplest electric machines. The phenomenon seems, for the moment, to be much smaller in scope than the “alphanumeric mutation,” but the two processes are correlated in time and space.

Now it holds the attraction of something that has happened. It has the allure of a storm. And their tale can give rise to another tale. The Professor's tale. The tale he has not yet told, the one he has until now kept from them.

The secret tale.

Yuri has the time to muse that this is what forges alliances, this sort of moment when words pass from one person to another in circulation fluid yet more solid than a diamond, horizontal and yet straining toward a common summit.

“Do you know why it was so easy to conduct the ‘World’ update?”

“Tell us,” says Chrysler imperturbably.

“Because it was a prototype. It’s only lacking the essential.”

“The essential?”

“What do you know about the Metastructure? Practically nothing, I bet. Shortly before 2020, while the space industry was booming, the Grand Jihad, after two decades of intense preparations, broke out for good, starting in Europe. A joint program between the American defense ministry and NASA held a consortium of laboratories and industrial corporations with the goal of eventually creating so-called fourth-generation artificial intelligence, with the very latest technology and software, which would be capable of efficiently handling all the planet’s problems and remaining immune to any viral attack or something of a similar sort. The consortium got back to its clients with a revolutionary idea.”

“A biopolitical megamachine, able to interconnect all the human organisms on the planet,” interjects Yuri.

“Yes, of course. But the most important fact was that it already wasn’t exactly a ‘machine’ in the usual sense. That’s why they called it a ‘metamachine,’ and then a ‘metastructure.’”

“What do you mean, not exactly a machine?”

The project designers were inspired by the Internet and then the NeuroNet, when it appeared. They understood that the best way to integrate all these emerging technologies into a single coherent ensemble wouldn’t be by means of a computer, or a particular network of computers, or even a single program, even a very sophisticated one.”

“What, then?”

“An invisible machine. A totally virtual machine. A completely digital quantum machine with no material support other than a few relays managed by regional governance bureaus. A purely numeric platform whose peripheral connections and interfaces will be men themselves. It was tested successfully in 2027 and permanently operational two years later. By 2030, it was at the head of the Global Bureau for good.”

Yes, I thought it happened in that order, muses Yuri to himself.

“And that is why it wanted to become a World—and why, unfortunately, I contributed to its doing so. Purely abstract, other than its biocybernetic connection with humanity, it desired to become a true World. It wanted its own body. Except that a computer, or even an entire network, wouldn’t be

enough. It wanted more. It wanted a body-world. It wanted to be a metaorganism, an authentically regulatory coevolutionary entity. It wanted to be an *ecological system*.”

There is a long pause.

An *ecological system*.

“So now, since the breakdown of the Metastructure is carrying it into its own inverted paradigm, what do we have?”

“Er ... an anti-ecological system?”

“You don’t create new concepts just by adding prefixes here and there. Of course an anti-ecological system, but you need to be certain of the ‘anti’ part of it—especially the double meaning of that prefix.”

“Double meaning?”

“Yes. Antiworld means opposed to the world, but it comes from the Latin *ante*, which means ‘before.’ That is why the Antechrist, the Antichrist, is also thought of as some sort of precursor, or an inverted accompanier to the coming of Christ to earth.”

“Before? But before what?”

“Before itself. It is its own antinome. And what is in the process of taking its place, this anti-ecology, is thus an anti-World, an ante-World.”

“Before the world?”

“Before *its* World.”

“But what was there before its World?”

“Exactly; there was nothing except itself, so its World was us, helping in the creation of it.”

“So it goes back to the situation from before *its* World, or the world as such?”

“Both of them, my good general. It isn’t important. The difference is a simple variation in density. What counts is what there is before any World. What there is before any ecology, before any system of autoregulation and coevolution.”

“And what is that?”

“Think about it for a minute. What is there just before life itself? Don’t think of the word *before* from a simple chronological perspective, but genetically, all right?”

“Genetic?”

“Yes. In the sense of creation and evolutionary processes, which are paradoxical.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“You will see. One day you’ll admit that evolution happens in two senses—on a temporal line, evolutionist phenomena climb up the thermodynamic arrow of time and influence a posteriori vital, essential selections.”

“But then ... the Metastructure ...”

“Is *devolving*, my young friend. It only functions in one direction now; or, rather, the regressive dynamic perpetuates, on its scale, with its methods, the progressive line that it was following until its Fall.”

“But, this anti-World, this anti-ecology—what is it?”

“You haven’t guessed? You’re kidding me.”

“I think I’ve guessed,” Judith Sevigny volunteers from behind them, sitting in the lotus position on a small camp bed.

“Ah? You, young woman? You have an idea of the makeup of this anti-World that the Metastructure is creating for itself and its bioexogenous systems—we men? Really?”

“Yes. I believe that before any concrete production there have to be plans.”

“Plans! Ah, bravo! Do you know what Leibniz said? ‘*God calculates, and the world creates.*’ Plans. Very good. And in your opinion, in what form do these plans exist, these plans for the Metastructure’s anti-World?”

“If it is a form of life, and even a metaform, since it continues to die when already dead, then as you say we are dealing fully with genetic science—which is your specialty, isn’t it?”

The man allows himself a small smile. “Yes, it is genetics. You have guessed; you have understood?”

“Yes, Mr. Zarkovsky. What exists before the World are Numbers. What exists just ‘before’ life is code. What programs its organization. The genetic code. In this particular case, it is an antigenetic code, with numbers serving to de-create the World.”

“Excellent. And do you have any idea what type of numbers we’re talking about here, miss? To what mathematical branch they belong?”

“No, sir; that I don’t know. But in view of what’s happening right now in Junkville, according to these gentlemen, I would say that it is visibly using binary-based numbers.”

“Truly excellent, miss. We will see, later, what it really goes back to. But for now, let’s continue. If numbers are the origin of all worlds, if code is the plan for all life, what would a binary code look like that could induce the

creation of an anti-World, that of the Metastructure, which in addition is dead?”

They are really hitting a ceiling of complexity, thinks Yuri. An ecology, then an anti-ecology; genetics, then anti-genetics. A code, and now an anti-code?

“You need to understand the nature of the inversions and intensifications and how they’re interconnected. What we end up with is this: the Metastructure wanted to become a World. At the moment it attained success, disturbing phenomena of unknown origin began to manifest themselves in its genetic—that is, semantic—structure. After its death, it was able to pursue a phenomenological metamorphosis, an extraordinary one, that we call ‘superdeath’ and that continues the work begun during its breakdown. Don’t forget its original nature—purely numeric, and using humans themselves as hardware platforms. And now we are present at a second ‘superdeath,’ its second phase, in which it is men that end up not being able to communicate except in machine language. What is your conclusion?”

Zarkovsky acts like a real professor; he does not give answers, he gives hints, and then asks the questions again, until his students’ thoughts move in the right direction.

He was probably a very good professor.

“Understand the nature of the inversion and intensification, I said. If men speak the language of the machine so that it can create its anti-World, what becomes the Metastructure’s genetic code, after its death?”

“I’m tempted to say that what you call its ‘intensified inversion’ is trying to destroy human language, all thought,” volunteers Yuri.

“Yes, but not necessarily in the way you imagine. Its true goal is not to destroy language; that is only an epiphenomenon. What it really wants is to absorb *Logos*, do you understand? What makes the World for the inverted Metastructure in its postmortem mutation is, precisely, human language. It is an exchange of the vampiric type, but it is also, objectively, a pure data transfer. The dead Metamachine does not wish to speak human language, which it knows, nor any language as such, because it knows all of them. It wishes to speak the language corps of all humanity, of the ensemble made up of each individual, and in order to do this it transforms the central units of humans into supercoding machines devolved to binary language. Don’t forget, either, the specific nature of this ‘metavirus,’ which is not really one

at all. When biosystems are attacked, the ‘natural’ organs transplanted or nano-implanted do not escape contamination. Whether we are talking about substitute neurons, artificial lymphocytes, transgenic hemoglobin, enlarged white globules, or entire transplanted organs, they all—or almost all—go the way of bionic technology. The Metastructure makes no distinction between artificial and natural, between mechanical and organic, because in most men the dividing line is blurry. The line between numbers and language, too. The line between life and death—well, that one I’d prefer not to talk about. The only line that still cannot be crossed is the one that separates us from Heaven. As you know.”

* * *

There are nights for such energies to coalesce. There are nights for such tales to unfold. There are nights for such truths to be revealed.

Otherwise, such a night as this could never happen, Yuri thinks.

He imagines it—the six people present in the mobile home, to whom the sheriff himself might doubtlessly be added—yes, this group of warriors against the night seems made specifically to battle the night on its own home field.

They form a sort of shield, a defense, a suit of armor, a titanium wall against the reversion of the world the Thing is trying to cause with total impunity.

He looks for a moment at Link de Nova, lost in thought as usual. The boy has so far said nothing during the discussions taking place. The night is young, but he wouldn’t say anything in any case, thinks Yuri.

But he does listen. Yuri knows that, too. He listens very attentively. So attentively, in fact, that he mentally records everything he hears. He will remember it down to the last phoneme.

That is part of the boy’s special gift. A sort of human voice-recording system ...

He then focuses his attention for an instant on Link’s mother, the android. So mysterious, silent like her son most of the time. She has fascinated Yuri for a long time; she is the only living female android he knows in the Territory.

What makes them sentient? Why were they so heavily affected by the successive Falls? Why have none of the cases he and Chrysler have

recorded thus far of the new “alphanumeric mutation” been found in these semi-artificial beings?

The androids, he thinks, have a bizarre but undoubtedly significant relationship with the Metastructure, and with the entity that has succeeded it.

Then, he does everything he can to avoid Judith Sevigny’s violet eyes.

“Never lose sight of the particular evolutionism that presides over the ‘superdeath’ of the Metastructure,” the Professor was saying.

“First phase: the Megamachine-World destroys itself with some sort of autoimmune disease—I don’t know, really—that takes with it all the electronic systems in its planetary network, with the exception of a few rare cases.

“Second phase, six years later: it surges up again, destroying the machines that had not been interconnected through its network. But note that, at the same time, it strikes out at bioloaded systems that have heretofore been resistant, of course, but also at technologies that are a bit simpler, requiring at the most a microprocessor or an analog device. So even telephones, most televisions, transistor radios—in short, the most rudimentary electronic systems—begin to die in their turn. Only batteries, cells, tension transformers, some devices like electric razors or refrigerators, and main cable and regulation systems still remain intact—which allows automobiles to continue operating, and some boats to sail around the world. But notice the *rhythm* of the Thing: during the first phase, everything goes very fast; in the space of a few months, the global network is contaminated, and in a year it is completely annihilated. Second phase: it began six years ago, but it is still not finished, while the third phase you’re talking about has only just begun.

“What does this mean? It is having more and more difficulty accomplishing its objectives. Something is resisting it. It has not managed to de-mechanize man, so it dehumanizes machines. To do this, it is no longer machines that it attacks but rather what there is of the machine in man, and of man in the machine. It cannot totally subdue electricity, so it seeks other routes of passage. Human language must have seemed easy prey to it, and it was not mistaken.”

Chrysler fidgets in the antique airplane seat he is sitting in, analogous to the ones in his own cabin—the Airbus debris was scattered over a very large area, Yuri thinks distantly.

“Listen, Professor. Theology is all well and good. Now we need to look at it from a very concrete, quasi-military angle. Let’s do some quick calculations. The First Fall takes place, and humanity loses more than half a billion inhabitants after 2025. So there are around seven billion humans remaining. The rhythm of the First Fall is very rapid because it instantaneously strikes everything connected to it—that is, everything. At maximum, in one or two years it has had its fill of victims; even the most resistant bio-implants have given way, except for some inexplicable exceptions and remissions, of which there are very few. But the Second Fall, which attacks the remaining half of humanity, is working at a slower pace, and so it takes longer, as you have remarked. Fine. That means that in six years, it hasn’t reached its ‘quota’ of destroying the still-living half of the human race—but on the other hand, thanks to the Third Fall, now, it is in a position to do just that. So we need to formulate a plan of action that takes into account these changes in rhythm and *modus operandi*.”

“That’s exactly right, Mr. Campbell, but any ‘concrete’—meaning ‘military’—approach is out of the question in this case. We can’t concretely approach an entity that has no concrete existence. We can’t make ‘war’ against an entity whose objective is to pacify absolutely everything.”

“So what, then?” demands Chrysler, dryly.

“The Scriptures, Mr. Campbell. If the Thing is able to ‘transcribe’ men into numeric data, it is in being able to do the reverse that we will have a chance to put a stop to its plans.”

“The reverse?”

“Once again, the Scriptures, Mr. Campbell. Everything is written there, including and especially what we are experiencing. The End of the World. It’s up to us to know how to ‘transcribe’ what the text tells us.”

“How will that help us fight the Thing?”

“Because we will know what to call it, though it has no name and cannot have one. We will understand its maleficent ‘numeric’ presence, because Numbers are divine creations; we will be able to send it back to its Nothingness, because we will be able to understand its genetic ‘code.’ In short, we will be able to destroy it.”

“So that’s it? Your library?”

“Exactly that, Mr. Campbell.”

Yuri is silent, stupefied, and at the same time excited by the revelation that a library might prove to be a weapon of mass destruction.

It is the most reassuring thought he has had in months.

The discussion continues into the depths of the night, though it is slowed by the crushing weight of fatigue. But the fatigue itself seems to provide a paradoxical boost to attention, concentration, glimmers of hope.

The night is not really made to hide secrets, but to bring the truth to light. One day, Chrysler had told Yuri: “The best way to hide something is to make it visible to the whole world.” A twentieth-century man wrote a story on the subject, “The Purloined Letter”—Edgar Allan Poe. The “vanished” letter was simply in its place on the desk.

The night is the secret of day. And daylight is the best hiding place in the world. Therein is the indication of “intensified inversions” Professor Zarkovsky speaks of. Therein is a mysterious sign concerning the Thing, and what remains of humanity on Earth. Especially them.

The Professor has picked up the thread of a discussion with Chrysler; Yuri forces him to focus on the conversation.

“Let’s go back to the problem posed by the Antichrist, if that’s all right. He, too, like the Metastructure was, is caught in a double ontological constraint. If he comes ‘before’ Christ, who, being God, is eternal, that means that he comes from the Nothingness, and thus that he is also located ‘after,’ meaning in two impossible places, and more than that, two *impossible* ones.

“But if Christ is the incarnation of the Unique, the Antichrist—who is also his *absolute* opposite, by definition, since Christ is *absolutely* God—operates according to a process of *disincarnation* of the Multiple; it directly attacks the *principle of individuation*, according to our old friend Duns Scotus, also called ‘the Subtle Doctor’; it directly attacks what causes a person not to be an individual, even if their ideas are disconnected, just as humanity is not man.”

“Can you explain that, please?”

“Ah ... yes. An individual is *indivis*, indivisible; that is his definition, but not what defines his personality, because that is at once infinitely divided and infinitely unique, since as an ‘image of God’ it reflects his properties of

First Cause: all in God is infinite, even the smallest of his parts, which are infinite in number. In addition, the ‘Thing,’ the Post-Machine, whatever name it goes by, must constantly seek the means to maximally disincarnate the Multiples, in other words, the individuals that still populate the globe. At the same time it faces two problems that combine to make only one:

“One, it must paradoxically find the means to incarnate itself—that is, to individuate itself in a single person, even though by nature, when it places itself into an individual unit, it is so that it can—also paradoxically—divide it.

“Two, it must disincarnate that in which it is incarnate, which creates an irreconcilable contradiction.”

Yuri glances out a nearby window. In turning his head, he catches for a brief instant the magnetic gaze of Judith Sevigny.

Its violet glow dances before his eyes even after he trains them straight ahead on the night-blue square of the sky.

He sighs, murmuring: “The Post-Machine is developing even with its apparent contradictions. For it, paradoxes aren’t problems. They’re solutions.”

No one answers him.

That is why we haven’t reached the end of our troubles, he thinks.

That is why it is absolutely necessary to protect Link de Nova and his powers.

That is why Sheriff Langlois did well to strengthen his security measures.

That is why, whatever form it takes, the “war” against the Thing, despite what Professor Zarkovsky thinks, will be the most terrible humanity has ever known, or will ever know.

Because this time, not only will it have brought the war on itself, as always, but for the very first time, and undoubtedly the last, it will be fighting directly against its own World.

Yes, to be exact: its own World will bring down on it the worst war of extermination in its entire history.

At dawn, everyone still in the mobile home falls asleep. Judith Sevigny departed a few minutes earlier; Link de Nova returned to his small personal trailer at the same time. Chrysler curls up in the reclined first-class airplane seat; Professor Zarkovsky sleeps on the camp bed, where he snores like a

buzz saw. Sydia Nova and Djordjevic have gone to their small bedroom, separated from the rest of the trailer by a double partition.

Yuri goes outside for a breath of air. The icy air, the compressed steel heaps glittering like diamonds. The varnished-turquoise sky. The faint glow on the horizon, signaling the imminent arrival of the sun. The persistent memory of two violet eyes in the dimness.

Everything seems so pure, so full of soft and serene beauty. The light itself seems to want to speak of this beauty, and yet we are in the middle of the Camp. The Camp-World. And we are only the Doctors.

Yuri looks for a moment at the enormous retaining wall the sheriff erected during the Second Fall. They had moved tons and tons of chassis, reshaping them into this rectangle of pure metal that turned Heavy Metal Valley into a virtually impregnable fortress.

He remembers a thought that occurred to him during the previous night.

No. They will not be the armor, the titanium shield protecting Link de Nova from the invisible arrows of the Thing, and by so doing, protecting the rest of humanity.

Because the Thing seems to come from nowhere, to be nothing but a “nowhere” itself; maybe a single, specific “place” would be able to fight it.

There is undoubtedly a titanium shield, hidden or exposed, somewhere in the Territory. But for Yuri, as he watches the day break over the Valley of Heavy Metal, it is becoming evident that Wilbur Langlois’ steel castle is the best place to fulfill this role.

It isn’t enough for Link de Nova to give life back to machines.

Here, it is the machines that will stand guard over *his* life.

19 > *ULTRA VIOLET*

When Link wakes up, around noon, he quickly realizes that Chrysler Campbell's pickup is gone. His father is working with the Professor on the construction of the "laboratory," not far from Bulldozer Park, where they have taken possession of a long Greyhound autocar that doesn't run but is perfectly suited to their needs.

His mother is probably taking a walk, as is her habit, along the retaining wall toward the Ridge.

And Judith ...

Better to erase her image from his memory.

He goes straight to his hangar, a bit higher up near Cadillac Avenue.

There, the music-making machines are waiting for him.

There, he will surely be able to make the image fade.

There, his pain might lessen a little.

He opens the door, which goes up with a groan, and enters the warehouse, where several biophosphorescent lamps light automatically around the room.

The machines are there, and they truly seem to be waiting for him, eager to be turned on, to see their small diodes blink, impatient to feel the shiver of electric current run through their bodies again.

Yes—here, he can calmly forget humanity. Especially his own. That is, if he really possesses any.

Okay. "Rock 'n' Roll Star." The song is ready. In two successive nights it has totally come together. Oasis, 1994, maybe the pinnacle of what was known as "rock music" for fifty years.

Such an obvious riff, so powerfully laid out. The compact mass of guitars, the mixed voice just above the harmonic rumble. The entire soul of electronic music is there. The basics don't lie in the frantic search for

“originality” at any price, but in the development of a specific synthesis of chaos previously abandoned, like in the middle of the ruins of a blitz dropped from a sonorous sky.

There are two or three thousand rock pieces whose main riff is, in its rhythmical organization and its harmonic intervals, absolutely the same.

What counts is the singular energy you project onto this musical matter. What counts is the sound particular to your electric guitar and how this acoustic substance is able to make its mark on the ear that hears it. What counts are the microvariations, the inverted chords, the arpeggios, the changes in keynote, et cetera, that make this impersonal appropriation of the riff possible.

Rock permits this strange symbiosis between the personal and the impersonal; in this, Link believes, it belongs to a singular form of poetry. The poetry of machines. The poetry of electricity. The poetry of supersonic speed. The poetry of accident. The poetry of catastrophe.

The poetry of the End of the World, whose coming it announces in violent explosions.

Electric rock “announces” the Apocalypse; it uses it as its main principle in the very tension of its own staging. In “showing” it, it makes it even more mysterious. In disguising it as a spectacle, it makes it even more monstrous.

But the deconstruction of the World is already happening, anyway, in all of society.

So, now: “Rock ’n’ Roll Star,” that pop hymn of the teenagers of the very last World, that *ballroom blitz* of the 1990s, that stratospheric *get it on* that propels your entire being toward clouds ready to burst at any instant.

He remembers what Yuri told him the night before, when they arrived with Campbell.

It plays in his head, a few words, like a riff contained in a handful of chords.

Yuri was right—but even he didn’t know just how right.

He and Chrysler truly are the “Camp Doctors;” of that there is no doubt.

But he, utterly and conclusively, is all alone—and all alone, he forms the *Camp Orchestra*.

The body of his electric guitar curves inward like a sphere inside the hangar, echoing the surface of its polymetallic structures. It is an unimpeachable barrier between him and the world. Acoustic waves fill the

vast space like water in a swimming pool. Diodes blink, screens glint, VU meters waver in cadence, needles quiver in their dials. The hangar is like a world within the world.

The music seems as if it might be able to hold beauty, naturally ephemeral as it is, on a line of tension stretching into infinity, he thinks. So the music might be able to keep the image of Judith Seigny constantly alive.

It does not bring forgetfulness, as he thought until now.

It brings consciousness, and all its dangers. It brings the idea that even inside the Camp, beauty cannot be completely annihilated. It brings the strange certainty that liberty is not found *outside* the Camp, because it no longer exists there. The Camp and the World are one now, and both of them are located in the very heart of his machine.

Now on to “Ultra Violet,” one of U2’s most beautiful songs; the Irish group probably best encapsulates what music produced for three-quarters of a century.

In discovering their work by means of his mysterious dream “downloads,” and in comparing them to others, he has come to a realization that leaves no room for doubt.

It was probably not preconceived on the part of these artists, but during all the time he spent exploring the mass of music in his dreams and then translating it when awake through his guitars and synthesizers, the evidence had come to him in droves, like so many stars in the Milky Way.

This fundamental discovery of the “archetypal” structure of the rock ‘n’ roll riff, for example, with its basic harmonic cadences, its pentagonal range inspired by Celtic songs, its sometimes paradoxical manner of bringing together the most angular rhythmic figures with the color of the most tender melodies. The techniques of alternating chords and the dominant between bass and guitar, especially for transitions from couplets to refrains.

Another achievement that has come to him after several years of practice on different recording and sound-processing machines, illuminating the origin and the end of this music from a surprising angle: after a bit of somewhat risky trial and error, Link has managed to work on multiple tracks in such a way as to copy and splice together the original vocals of Brian Eno, Björk, Goldfrapp, Bauhaus, Lou Reed, or Syd Barrett in order to combine them with arrangements literally inspired by the lieder of Strauss, Mahler, and Brahms. It is with real surprise mingled with profound

questioning that he has realized that a number of the vocal melodies that sometimes accompany the sound walls of his electric guitar and the sampled rhythms on his factory soundtracks seem, as if by magic, to fit together and prove almost harder, more violent, icy, with a simple cello or harpsichord or a small chamber orchestra—that is, in the purest a cappella expression.

If the vocal tracks of a song by Garbage, for example, can be perfectly recreated in the form of a classic lied, where then is the split, the separation, the disconnection?

“Ultra Violet” is a true gem of this sort. Its apparent simplicity hides several sophisticated traps, particularly in the harmonic sense. But once detected, these traps become jewel boxes for the most perfect diamonds.

More dangerous yet, Link cannot prevent the lilac eyes of Judith Seigny from dancing before him—her silhouette, her body. No, even worse, he can do more than see her, hallucinate her in some semi-dreamlike way—he can feel her near him.

I feel her nearest with music, he thinks, as he attacks the intro.

There are still other mysteries in this music that has made electricity into its very language. So, how to explain the numerous “premonitions” that prove the existence of songs written in atomic light? The cases are innumerable; it would be impossible to envision anything more than a partial list. Besides, there is little interest in quantifying this secret evidence. An example will suffice to illuminate the whole phenomenon. “Sweet Bird of Truth,” from the album *Infected* by The The, the British group led by Matt Johnson with Johnny Marr on guitar, describes—with the cold lyricism appropriate to the recounting of a catastrophe—the fatal nosedive of an American warplane and its living cargo of “GI Joes” flying “above the Gulf of Arabia.” *It is an urgent warning*, says the captain, *our altitude is falling, there’s no time for thinking, all hands on deck. ALL HANDS ON DECK.*

The album was released in 1986.

Five years before the First Gulf War.

Another mystery, even more troubling: no one, it seems to Gabriel, at least as far as he knows, has ever pointed out the fact that rock ’n’ roll was born

at the end of the Second World War—that is, at the beginning of the Third. “Search and Destroy,” as the title of a 1973 Stooges song so explicitly said.

The electronic music of the twentieth century appeared in the shadow cast by the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Transistors, vacuum tubes, coils, all the technology that would one day be implanted in simple jazz guitars and radio amplifiers came from the *military* progress made in that era. When the computer appeared, itself born of the Manhattan Project, music was among its first artistic applications. Microcomputers and the Internet, later technologies but still military in origin, were immediately assimilated by the rock industry.

In Vietnam and during the three Gulf Wars, fighting soldiers listened to endless electronic music—rock, blues, country, reggae, rap, and techno, the volume turned low on their headsets. During the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, Africa, central Asia, and then during the Grand Jihad—on the western side, at any rate—and up until the final jolts that followed the Death of the Metastructure, it was to the sound of this music created in the infernal forges of the twentieth century that people had become what they now are.

For the true songwriters of the time, it had rapidly become unthinkable to write about love as they had done before the Great Flash—or about anything else, for that matter.

Instead of stupidly following the advice of a German philosopher of the time—another German!—they had each and all understood that not only was it possible to write after Auschwitz, it had become more necessary than ever.

The Nazi and Communist camps had not been able to silence them. The Camp-World will not be able to, either. Because I am the Camp Orchestra. I am what will give them new life in this Anus Mundi.

Silence is not the answer to a gag placed in the mouth. It is the sad consequence, and the rest is only sophism.

One day, Chrysler told him about an aphorism by George Orwell, an author from the middle of the previous century, whose most famous book had predicted, almost word for word, the world of the Metastructure. This writer had said one day that *the future would resemble a boot eternally crushing a mouth*.

Chrysler had said that a French writer whose name he had forgotten had continued the aphorism, saying: *But there is still a chance for the mouth. It*

can, if its will is strong enough, devour both the boot and the foot inside it.

I am the mouth, thinks Link de Nova, and I am starving. The boot had better be on guard.

The night is very black when he emerges from the hangar. His natural optic system automatically increases its perception levels in a gradual transition to artificial luminic amplification. Now the starlight alone is enough for him to see as if in broad daylight—broad daylight tinted sodium yellow; the broad daylight of a highway tunnel; the broad daylight of electronic war.

Why does he decide abruptly not to go home to bed, but to venture once more toward the cosmodrome, toward Sheriff Langlois' "red zone"?

No rational reason. An impulse. A desire. A need. A will.

No explanation except that the cosmodrome is there. That it has been there for decades. That it will no doubt be there eternally. No explanation other than the night and the colluding sonorous saturation of his mind, his whole body, this electricity that has refused to die for hours, making sleep impossible, as it so often does, until the early hours of the morning.

This electricity that wants to act. This electricity that compels the human to walk, supplying the engine that takes him to this place where, for more than forty years, Earth and Sky have been linked.

This electricity that sees through the shadows, this electricity that uses his dreams to revive century-old music, this electricity the Thing wants to make into a "thing" of its own.

This electricity that is he.

Nearly surprised by one of the sheriff's patrols, he spends almost half an hour flat on his stomach, hiding behind a small bank of hawthorn shrubs, waiting for the two cops to finish their inspection of the site. They are on equal footing with him in their ability to see in the dark. Shortly after the Second Fall, the sheriff managed to collect a store of Chinese-made combat binoculars, and they are invariably used now by the night patrols. But for these humans, the binoculars are technology—they are external prostheses—they add to their bodies, superimposing themselves on their vision.

For Link, on the other hand, the phenomenon is entirely "natural"—at least, biological—this amplified night vision is a simple extension of his

sense of sight, integrated as a cellular system inside his optic nerve. The night is programmed in his brain.

That makes a huge difference. Enough of one so that the sheriff's men, even with their state-of-the-art binoculars, don't see him—but he sees them, never losing sight of them for even a fraction of a second.

Quietly, he descends the sandy slope to the first concrete esplanades that mark the cosmodrome's entry.

Everything is so calm here.

Everything seems so calm, even though the sight of the launch platforms causes an instant vision of pipes ejecting their fire and the fracas that goes along with that.

Everything seems so calm, even more so because this image is accompanied by the certainty that it will never happen again.

He is seized with the desire to retrace his route of the previous year, during the summer of '69. Apollo Drive, Gemini Drive, North Junction Road, the northern end of the strip.

And the hotel.

The hotel where he met Balthazar, the sheriff's dog.

That deserted hotel.

That hotel rumored to be connected to the Death of the Metastructure.

That hotel already waiting for him, at the top of the row, with all its orange capsules.

This time, Link stops for only an instant under the entry arch leading to the vast divider strip that surrounds the building. No hesitation. Rather, the inexplicable sensation of finding himself on the edge of a sacred place, a synagogue, an invisible sanctuary.

His naturally amplified eyes discern each detail that enters his field of vision—textures, colors, structures, shapes, surfaces, gaps, shadows, light; all is recreated within his optic nerve, in a cross-hatching of artificial shades.

He walks, slowly, toward the building's entry door.

The hotel is swathed in the most complete blackness. Scavengers have removed nearly half the capsules, but all the others have remained, empty, and the hotel's interior spaces seem abandoned as well.

It is rare in the Territory; so much space, offering so much well-protected shelter from bad weather, containing still-operating machinery, yet utterly untouched.

He enters the hall. With a single glance, he takes in the deserted front desk to his left. An arched opening in the vast wall to his right opens directly onto a patio covered by a composite roof with programmable transparency.

He can see the corridors leading to the elevators. He sees the numbered orange doors and those of the service stairways, marked by their steel gray color and the lack of numbers, with just the indication of their cardinal location: west, south, north, east.

He takes a few steps toward the patio, pausing for a few instants in front of the huge empty space. A few scattered chairs, two overturned tables, some broken dishes on the floor—this, he sees, was a community dining room.

There can be hardly any usable objects left in the hotel, he thinks as he leaves the patio. The capsules that weren't taken away by scavengers have probably been systematically robbed, down to the last coat hanger, the last faucet handle, the last doorknob.

The entry hall yawns before him.

He is facing the front desk.

And the dog.

There is a good minute of silence, a full minute of mutual observation, a minute that holds all the time in the universe.

It is Link de Nova who finally breaks the ice.

"It seems we're destined to keep running into each other in this hotel, at night."

"You don't know how right you are," replies Balthazar.

"I imagine we both have excellent reasons for coming here regularly."

"You don't know how right you are," the dog repeats.

"Would you believe that I know why this place is important to you?"

"Only if you would believe the same of me."

"You worked here before the Fall," says Link de Nova, feeling like he has just played a very important card.

“I worked here *during* the Fall, my young friend. I was in the vicinity when the attack against the cosmodrome took place.”

Link hesitates. What to say? How to avoid letting on just how much he *doesn't* know? “People are saying things about this hotel, and the attack. You must be aware of that.”

“If I had to track down and quash all the rumors in the Territory, I'd drop dead of exhaustion within twenty-four hours.”

“Fine, but why come back here so often, even though the place is totally abandoned?”

The bionic dog looks at Gabriel with eyes black as two pieces of burning coal in a circle of powder. “Precisely because the place *isn't* totally abandoned.”

Link doesn't blink. He continues to watch the cyberdog as calmly as if his heart wasn't beating double time—though he doesn't even know why.

“What do you mean?” he asks in a murmur.

“Want to see?”

The dog offers him a canine smile as an invitation, a microdiode implanted in his forehead flashing incessantly from red to green and back again.

On the upper floors of the Hotel Laika, the night has gone ultraviolet. Tangles of barbed wire fence off the universe outside the visible spectrum, luminescence in constant variations of intensity, specks of photoelectricity become perceptible like so many handfuls of sand thrown into the space in front of him.

Ultraviolet, that viral darkness that penetrates structures just as it does the depths of masses of target cells. Ultraviolet, the residual light that falls from the stars. Ultraviolet, the silhouette of the cyborg dog trotting in front of him. Ultraviolet, all the numbered doors that stretch endlessly along the corridors.

Ultraviolet, his own hands that push open the emergency-exit doors on each floor as they climb the service staircases.

Ultraviolet, his own memory, a photosensitive tablet revealing a world he does not know, but which—he doesn't know where his absolute certainty comes from—knows him intimately.

“Does the electricity not work at all in this hotel?”

Ten floors on foot is no small feat, but the questioning continues.

Balthazar, walking a little in front of him, turns his head for a second in Link's direction. "We can both see perfectly in the dark, so what does it matter?"

"It was just a question. Not even a phosphorescent lightbulb?"

Link is strangely reminded of the previous night, with Yuri and Chrysler, and the dead electric machines from Surveyor Plateau.

Tenth floor. The top floor. He pushes open the security door and finds himself in a hallway with the dog.

Balthazar sits on his haunches and stares at Link, his eyes night-black points in the ultraviolet night.

"Gabriel," he says in his pseudohuman voice, "I don't believe in chance."

"I don't either," says Link de Nova, laughing. "But maybe not for the same reasons."

"The reasons don't matter. It means that you don't believe in it, or, let's say, in its causal importance to a 'series of accidents.'"

"Why, Balthazar. I didn't know dogs were so keen on academics and mathematics."

"I'm a little more than a dog, Gabriel. But dogs themselves don't believe in chance."

"Why are you so insistent about that?"

Link senses that they are in a place where the most profound darkness may lead to the brightest light.

"What do you know about this place?"

"The hotel? Not much, truthfully. Now I know you worked here until the day of the Fall, and—"

"No. I never said that."

"What? I—"

"I told you I worked here before and *during* the Fall. I continued to monitor the hotel for weeks, including after the death of its manager."

Okay, says Link de Nova to himself. The dog kept watch over the area for the whole last part of 2057, and maybe after that. He probably killed a lot of looters. Maybe he even sabotaged the electrical system himself. That would have made the hotel's reputation, right there.

It would explain the utter desolation of the place.

"You come back here often, Balthazar, don't you?"

The dog flashes its amusing half-human, half-canine smile. “Yes, very often. More often than you. But the same amount as a third person. A third regular visitor.”

“A third visitor?”

“Yes, Gabriel. Another visitor. Another man interested in the Hotel Laika.”

“But—but why? There’s nothing left here to loot!”

“Exactly.”

“What do you mean, ‘exactly’?”

“If there’s nothing left to loot, you won’t be bothered by looters.”

“So why would anyone come here regularly?”

“Well, Gabriel, what makes you come here?”

“Twice, Balthazar. I’ve come twice. Three times, if you count the very first time, in the summer of ’69, when I met you here. And last time I just went around the outside of the place on my way back up the strip.”

“What kept you from going inside?”

Link feels as if he has been caught in a trap. The cyberdog maintains a trace of his ironic smile at the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t know. What is the third man looking for?”

The canine smile widens. The microdiode moves visibly between the pointed ears. “That’s exactly what we’re going to find out tonight,” he says, his bionic soldier dog’s face suddenly illuminated with the primitive desire of the hunt.

“He’s coming?” asks Link, his voice filled with anxious curiosity.

“Not exactly, Gabriel. He’s already here.”

20 > ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER

The little girl is dead. Her brother isn't doing much better. He is going through an amphibolic phase, in which the continuing variations of his symptoms make a firm diagnosis impossible, but at least they can conduct their series of biological analyses on him.

We are the Camp Doctors, says Yuri to himself, observing his companion's detached attitude and knowing that it very nearly matches his own.

The little girl is dead; they can do nothing for her now—and she can do nothing for them.

And the worst part, thinks Yuri, is that we can't do anything else for her brother, either, who will probably die like her in a few days, if his current phase is any indication.

We are the Camp Doctors. For now, we observe and analyze death at work. For now, we are medical men without medicine; doctors who do not heal, who can barely soothe the mildest of sufferings.

We are number collectors, agents of the Number; we seek to decrypt this invisible code, to understand the workings of this machine that is not a machine, the makeup of this World that is not a world, the emerging of this Camp in which we all live, and where Chrysler and I have a role to play about which we know almost nothing.

The little girl is dead. She is pretty, even in the pallor of death. Her glassy blue-green eyes are open; Chrysler closes them. Before he does so, Yuri imagines that he can glimpse a vivid intelligence, petrified like crystal. She probably deserved to live. Chrysler motions to him discreetly, and Yuri arranges the necroscanners around the head of the young corpse.

The parents, white and still, eyes swimming with tears, are mired in mutual stony silence. They answer with hand signals, or vague murmurs at

best.

Chrysler asks their permission to conduct biopsies and neuroanalyses on the boy. The father nods his head; the mother seems not to have even heard. With a rapid, sure motion, Chrysler injects a powerful anxiolytic into the boy, whose verbal outflow immediately tapers off. Then he attaches a number of nanomachines to the youth's skull and attentively reads the bands of numbers that scroll across the various control screens.

Yuri watches Chrysler, sees him hesitate for an instant. Will he do it? Does he dare? Have we come to that point?

"We'll come back tomorrow and do some more detailed analysis," says Chrysler. "But I need you to answer a few questions; it's important."

The father motions him to go ahead.

"How long ago did the symptoms appear?"

"Fifteen days for Jessica. Eleven for Jeremy."

"When did your daughter shift into the ... numeric phase—I mean, you understand, when there was nothing more but digital noise ...?"

"Two days ago. In the morning, two days ago."

Chrysler takes down each detail carefully on the micropad Link de Nova restored for him.

Little Jessica died just after dawn.

The Driscolls were on their list of new cases, but their name didn't come up until this morning. They are part of the first rotation of the day.

But even eight o'clock in the morning is two hours too late for Jessica Driscoll.

It is sixty years too early for Jessica Driscoll.

Jessica Driscoll barely lived a scant ten years.

During the first two Falls, a marginal but constant phenomenon was noticed: children who had not yet reached the age of puberty had survived in greater numbers than the rest of the population. There have been myriad theories on the subject since then, but interest has gradually dwindled and rival doctrines can no longer find any grounds for experimentation of any kind. So, practicality has taken priority.

Or, rather, survival has.

But the statistical data in their possession for the last few weeks shows that in this area as well, the Thing is changing its strategy, its modus operandi—maybe even its objective, thinks Yuri.

“Necro Triads will probably come to see you today. If you sell her to them, ask for a high price. Don’t let those vultures screw you over, especially the ones from Vortex Townships. You would do better to deal with the guys from Clockwork Orange. Their position is less secure; they’ll negotiate.”

The mother dissolves into wracking sobs, her face buried in her hands.

Yuri tells himself that Chrysler has done everything possible to help this shattered family. He had wondered, a few minutes earlier, if he should ask for permission to take the dead little girl with them, to sell her himself to some Triad, but he remained silent.

The advice Chrysler has given to the family concerning the Triads should be taken as authentic counsel from a professional Territory expert. He is sincerely offering all he can, as proof of his compassion for this family that no longer exists.

But the only information he can give them is a choice of several organ-recycling companies.

We are the Camp Doctors, Yuri repeats to himself over and over.

We are the Camp Doctors.

We are priceless, and yet we are worthless.

We are the ones who should bring hope, and we can’t even slow things down for one minute.

We are the ones who should have healing words, but it is precisely words that the disease attacks now.

We are doomed to the same silence as the Driscolls and all the other families we are seeing in Deadlink, Omega Blocks, Junkville, X-15, Surveyor Plateau, and here in Dreadnought, the only township, though a little-developed one, in the county of Champlain Banks.

There are already ten cases reported in this tiny community of fewer than five thousand souls.

And one of the ten has already died.

The process is following its course.

Lake Champlain sparkles in the sun, gold light glinting off its surface like golden whirling dervishes on a lapis lazuli background. It is so beautiful, this morning sky, its blue as pure as the gaze of a little girl who has just died.

He doesn’t know why, but he feels tears sliding slowly down his cheeks.

Sitting in the pickup's passenger seat, he turns his head to the east, pressing his face against the window glass.

* * *

Later, in the early afternoon, the sky turns a threatening purplish gray. A cold wind rises. Toward the east, far above the Atlantic, a black bar can be seen, shuddering with bloodred tremblings.

An oceanic storm coming from south of Greenland will soon strike the coastlines of Maine, Nova Scotia, and New England.

They arrive in view of Electra Glide in Blue, a township located just south of Grand Junction, at the very edge of their inspection zone. The particular combination of wind forces in the territory creates small armies of tumbleweeds blowing just above the ground and sometimes concatenating in giant rhizomes, studded with thorns, that often end up piled against some natural or artificial obstacle. Electra Glide is a township of Canadian motorcyclists, originally Hells Angels from Quebec, but after the two Falls the microcity was emptied of three-quarters of its population. Those that remained in their makeshift huts sold their Harley-Davidson bikes long ago to buy the necessities of life. Yuri and Chrysler know well that Sheriff Langlois wasted no time in buying up a lot of legendary Electra Glides and several lowriders from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as V-Rods from the beginning of the century, in return for electric-battery or gasoline-powered generators along with the necessary fuel, construction materials, and even rented building vehicles. A whore from Deadlink has provided Chrysler with some descriptions of typical cases originating from this township. At the city's southern entry, an old Hells Angel from Quebec, more than sixty years old, has been uttering unintelligible phrases for days. When they see him, with his colors still emblazoned on the back of his leather jacket, paralyzed with shame in the face of the deterioration that is growing worse and worse every hour in him, Chrysler makes a gesture of commiseration, flashes an ultracalm doctor's smile, and injects him immediately. Hells Angels can be difficult men to deal with, he explains. He talks frankly to the man about what is happening.

"We are going to try to cure the linguistic contamination you are suffering from, but we cannot promise anything. On the other hand, we can repair all of your electric and electronic devices. I should also tell you that

we have an interest in some of your machines, and they would serve as an exchange if we are able to decontaminate you.”

Yuri doesn't have to wait long before the answer—positive, of course—bursts from the man's larynx, an incomprehensible babble that both of them understand perfectly, as always.

Two other cases live west of the township. An old “biker chick” in phase four, who emits binary numbers with a New Brunswick accent in her sidecar. A young man, a recent refugee originally from Kentucky, in the final part of phase two, who must be forcefully held down before Chrysler can inject the narcoleptic. Biopsies, scans, nanomodels, neuroscans, analyses, samples. Tiny pieces of bodies deposited into test tubes.

Other reported cases prove impossible to find. The old hooker from Deadlink isn't a first-class informant according to Chrysler's strict hierarchy, but in a few days the phenomenon has grown even more intense. Everything is there for the taking.

Yuri knows that events are completely outstripping them.

But there is nothing else to do. Compile data and share it often with Professor Zarkovsky and Milan Djordjevic.

Continue to take inoperative electric machines to Link de Nova. And, periodically, present the alphanumeric mutation to him, hoping that the expected phenomenon will finally happen.

If everything goes well, thinks Yuri, we'll all be dead before the rest of the world's working coffeemakers give out.

The rain, concentrated in a violent squall, lashes against the pickup. The heavy Ford Super Duty can barely move, slipping and skidding on the surface of the sloppy mud serving as a road. Its back end fitted with two pairs of tires on each side, it rears up at each acceleration like a wild mechanical horse, just barely controllable. The windshield is literally covered with a vibrating pond that the wipers can never quite clear. As if contained within a globe of water, they can no longer even see the outline of the peak of Surveyor Plateau, which they have just left behind them.

The Atlantic storm currently striking the Northeast seems like nothing less than an oceanic cyclone.

The rain has rapidly transformed paths, trails, rows, and even the main road into muddy expanses they would never be able to navigate without the

pickup and its Triton V8 engine. The snow that piled up during the huge three-day blizzard hasn't yet had the time to melt. With the help of this new deluge from the sky, it is saturating the already-spongy ground until all the road will end liquid, lumpy, muddy, and totally impassable.

The day is ending. They finished their planned route perfectly; the storm didn't come early enough to ruin their agenda. They will even be home on time.

They skimmed all the small townships in the south of the Territory and to the limits of Grand Junction in a large circular arc spanning from the Vermont border to the low Ontarian plains. Now their "map" includes almost the whole "territory." Their central storage units are filled with databases, statistics, diagrams, long lists of figures, codes, and equations.

Our storage units are like small-scale versions of what the Thing does to humans after they die, thinks Yuri, only a little troubled by the revelation.

They arrive in view of Aircrash Circle just after nine o'clock. The bulk of the storm is now over Quebec and the state of New York, but moving rapidly toward the Territory. The rain transforms abruptly into a driving downpour a few seconds before Campbell pulls the pickup into his garage. A giant fork of lightning splits the sky horizontally in a colossal electric-blue filament, followed by the thundering detonation of an entire celestial artillery. The rain falls in roaring sheets. It will probably last the whole night. Now there is nothing left to do but wait, wait for the elements to finish with this part of the terrestrial globe. Wait for the night-ocean to end, as they waited for the end of the night-desert, and then the end of the night-blizzard.

There will surely be flooding and mud slides in every county, every township. After the sand, snow. After the snow, rain. And after all that, mud.

It is coming from everywhere, in every possible form. Deserts, blizzard, ocean. Every day the Territory is more and more like a guard tower under siege from all directions.

"Did you notice?" Yuri asks Chrysler later, during the night, over the incessant noise of the rain hammering against the roof of their cabin.

"Notice what?"

"The procession of numbers. The intervals between the different 'Falls': '57, death of the Metamachine; '63, first postmortem mutation; '69, second mutation. Six years each time."

“So what? We know it’s systematic.”

“If we count the end of the Metastructure as the point of origin, we have *three sixes*—maybe. But it’s actually also possible that the third is yet to come.”

“The third what? The third six?”

“Six six six, Chrysler. In the Bible, that’s the Devil’s Number. The number of the Antichrist.”

Chrysler says nothing for a long moment. Then he asks: “So that means we have until winter ’75-’76 until a third postmortem mutation takes place? *A Fourth Fall?*”

“No, there won’t be a Fourth Fall. The Thing is copying divine acts. I talked to Link de Nova about it. Christ, in climbing Golgotha, fell three times before he was cast to the ground and nailed to the cross.”

“The Thing is copying the crucifixion of Christ?”

“I think that’s exactly what the final stage will be—how it will invert the process of nailing the Man-God to the cross. In the meantime, it is copying—or worse, *parodying*—his Calvary.”

“But if your calculations are correct, it will still be six years before the next wave?”

“I’m not so sure anymore; we’ve seen that the transition phases are tending to be superimposed on one another. Six years from now might be the time when the Thing has completely finished its work.”

Another long silence from Chrysler, like an inaudible counterpoint to the noise of the deluge raining down on the earth.

“Do you really think Djordjevic’s library will help us?”

Yuri looks out the Airbus window set in the door at the landscape of Aircrash Circle, disappearing behind a watery cloud, practically reduced to a gaseous state in the midst of the gusts that whirl like waves of showering meteors.

“Djordjevic and the Professor wouldn’t bring this library thousands of kilometers for nothing. It will help us, Chrysler.”

“But do you think it will be enough, Yuri? That’s what I’m asking you.”

Yuri contemplates for a moment the weapons that Campbell has carefully lined up against one of the Combi-Cube’s wall panels. They gleam blue-green in the light of the small phosphorescent lamp.

“It is necessary, Chrysler. Necessary. It’s true that it will undoubtedly not be enough.”

“What will be enough, then?”

“I know you’re going to laugh at me for this, but I think it depends on us.”

“Us? You mean, you and me?”

“Maybe, in the end. But I was thinking of all of us. All humans. And to start with, all the humans in the Territory.”

“You want to launch a Crusade against the Thing?”

“No. I want Link de Nova to do more than take care of the isolated cases we bring him one by one.”

“Shit, Yuri, you know very well that the sheriff himself is making sure the operation is carried out that way.”

“Yes. But he’s going to change his mind, under pressure from Djordjevic and the Professor. You know it. These are revolutionary times. We, too, need to pass into another phase.”

“But what? You want Link de Nova to immunize every person in the territory?”

“That’s what the Professor’s trying to convince Djordjevic of, as far as I know. They want to try to fight the entity globally, not just locally, or even microlocally, as they say.”

“That’s actually a really good idea. Except that we have no idea of how the Thing is moving forward.”

“Right—and even if we did, it still wouldn’t be enough. The Thing is very ... *clever*, to put it mildly, Chrysler.”

“So?”

“Link de Nova changes his *modus operandi*, and so does the thing. We need to prepare ourselves for the worst.”

“The worst? What could that be?”

“No way to know.”

“Well, then, if you please, explain to me how we prepare for an event we can know nothing about.”

“By preparing ourselves to face what can’t be known. By preparing ourselves to not know anything about what is going to happen to us.”

“So, to prepare ourselves for nothing.”

“Yes,” says Yuri, “exactly. We would do best to prepare ourselves for nothing. That’s the best way to be ready. Ready for anything.”

21 > **ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK**

Rock seems, by definition, to be the music of the machine. Not only because this particular sort of art is made with the necessary assistance of this or that machine, but more because the machine as such, as a potential world, and thus in all its possible forms, uses this or that riff, this or that sound, this or that rhythm, this or that harmony, for its own existence.

Rock gives *existence* to the machine, through music. Existence, meaning individuality that goes beyond its simple specific identity as a *thing*, even an electrically “animated” one.

It gives it a voice. It gives it language. Infinite tautness between sense and form, sign and substance, matter and spirit.

It gives it the means—how did the Professor put it?—oh yes, to become a coevolutionary, regulatory, *ecological* process.

Thanks to rock, electricity becomes the central aesthetic meaning of the machine and no longer just the current that permits it to function. This is the essential point.

Rock gives electricity the possibility to be Creation and not just Creature, to become orchestra/meaning/sound, the Kingdom of Man, and not just an instrument, a mechanism, a worker ant. Electricity animates machines as much in the electrophysical sense as the most purely symbolic. Rock is the electricity-language of the Machine. It turns electricity into poetry articulated amid the proper structure of sonorous language, which it permits machines to enunciate, and all of the meaningful propositions coming from this physiology, not just in purely mechanical terms but as a series of archetypal aesthetic configurations, can perhaps after all be justly called “clichés.” Wasn’t it the poet Baudelaire who said once that genius was the invention of cliché?

Thanks to rock, machines have a soul, an electric soul, just as they have a body, an electric body, and organs, electric organs—guitars, amplifiers, basses, effects modules and pedals, synthesizers, sequencers, and rhythm boxes. And human voices.

Because the human voice is the most sophisticated of all machines. Its neural electricity alone is projected in the sounds of the deepest breath, there where the motor impedance is born, in the organic harp of the larynx.

Thanks to electric music, machines become “undivided” in their turn, both unique as singularities capable of expressing the particular sonority of an individual, and specific, that is, “universal,” enunciating their own substance, their “core,” their “color”—in short, all of the qualities that are found, unchanged, from one model to another. Their singular existence arises from this articulation, this “double fold.”

Why does this thought come while he is trying mentally to reproduce the terrible general tautness, rhythmic and melodic, of “Red,” from King Crimson’s album of the same name, as it came to him last night in his sleep?

Since the long night spent in the Hotel Laika, a sort of breach has opened in the veil masking the world of his illusions.

He saw what he shouldn’t have seen.

He heard what should never be heard.

He understood what it would have been better not to understand.

He hasn’t been able to talk to anyone about it. He shares this secret with the sheriff’s bionic dog.

And with the man who knows the secret of the hotel.

Which is also, in large part, the secret of his own existence.

The day is, above all, that of the ship’s arrival in Halifax. It is the morning of February second.

Finally. It’s here. The library is in America. It crossed the Atlantic without too many problems, except that its ship had had to deal with the violent storm that had risen behind it as it passed southwest of Greenland—at least, that is how his father put things at the small, informal meeting they hold around noon.

His father is very nervous. His mother is doing her best to calm his anxiety with the help of Professor Zarkovsky.

“Paul, your friend from Junkville guaranteed the perfect safety of the men escorting the cargo during its time in Quebec, right?”

“Don’t do that, Milan. He knows his work, and he knows the Territory. I know he found the right men for the job; I met them.”

“Oh?” Djordjevic asks. “What makes you so sure?”

Zarkovsky chuckles.

“You met them too, Milan. And they satisfied you on all points.”

Link shivers in his corner without anyone taking any notice of him. He has already guessed. Incredible connections are forming relentlessly in his head.

Djordjevic knits his eyebrows, two black bars above a pair of black eyes that seem able to consume everything that passes within his field of vision.

“The two bounty hunters? The ones that traffic with Gabriel? You’re crazy if you trust men like that.”

Link intervenes, timidly.

“Father, if I may—these men are honest; they don’t just ‘traffic,’ as you say; they help people not to die. I also know they are in the process of compiling an enormous database for you and the Professor on the cases that are of interest to us—this ‘second mutation’ in the Territory.”

“My dear son, I don’t doubt their skills. It’s their ability to stay *honest*, as you call it, around the equivalent of an archaeological treasure.”

Link sighs. His father isn’t really living in the now; his needle has stayed stuck before the Fall. He can’t yet admit that his twelve or thirteen thousand books, even the most precious ones, don’t have any real value outside the archives of the Vatican.

Through one of the mobile home’s large windows, Link catches a glimpse of the sun, which is casting moving, glittering stars on all the surrounding metal and Plexiglas surfaces, creating a silent, golden, blinding, pyrotechnical, unceasing storm of light bouncing gold like grains of sand off the towers and piles of automobiles.

“Father, what no one has the courage to tell you is that these books have great intrinsic value, but here in the Territory they possess no value other than the price of paper by the kilo or the ton. Do you understand? No one’s going to risk his life to steal them. And neither Yuri McCoy nor Chrysler Campbell has any interest in causing this operation to fail. Yuri has told me that they, too, are very curious to know what this famous transatlantic library really contains, and they know that can’t happen without you.”

“Milan,” says the Professor, “I can’t urge you strongly enough to listen to your son. These two men are trustworthy. They know the Territory and the

south of Quebec by heart. We need them to guide the papal escort and the truck here.”

Milan doesn't reply; it is almost as if he has lost interest in the problem altogether.

He looks at his son, eyebrows still drawn together, black eyes shining with low intensity.

“You told me they're planning to come back tonight for one of your ‘experiments,’ right?”

“They aren't *experiments*, Father, as you well know. I'm trying to take care of people, to repair their machines, and in exchange I ask only for an addition to my collection of musical instruments.”

“I told you, you can't keep going with this. Even if your mother sees things differently. This scandal has to stop. Simony. Outrage. I've already spoken to the sheriff about it. You're lucky that fucking Wilbur Langlois has a head harder than granite—but I'm not going to give up; I'll show him.”

“Father, why are you still living in the past? The alphanumeric contamination is gaining ground every day. That's why they're coming tonight. We have to find a real strategy. Fast. You're going to have to realize that my little ‘experiments,’ as you call them, have allowed me to learn a huge amount about the Thing threatening us. I don't mean ‘learn’ in the usual sense—it isn't my abstract, logical brain—it has more to do with pure intuitive memory, almost dreamlike. But what I can tell you, Father, and Balthazar himself has confirmed it, is that I ‘sense the Thing’ as if I were a hunting dog!”

Professor Zarkovsky looks at Link with singular intensity. “Have you never suspected, young man, that this might be an ability you share with the Thing?”

The night sky is streaked with long, creamy striations whose curves gleam in the starlight, the final rear guard of the ocean storm. Altocirrus clouds in high-altitude escadrilles pursued by Moon Flak. It creates ultraviolet lines in a sky exploding with stars.

Link is at another of the habitual meeting places. This time, due to the sodden terrain and damaged roads left by the storm, he has asked Campbell to come to the place closest to HMOV.

He parked his quad-cycle at the edge of a small clearing in one of the rare surviving wooded areas west of the cosmodrome, on the border of the counties of Grand Junction and Heavy Metal Valley. The area is filled with wild grasses; his Suzuki's wheels are lost amid the masses of reeds, sharp-leaved weeds, and night-flowering catchfly.

There, to the east, between two rocky hills, he can make out the metallic structures of some parts of the cosmodrome—platforms, launch towers, a series of pylons and their large radar antennae, and the mobile shadows of tumbleweeds blowing across the tarmac in all directions.

Here, all around him, is the scenery typical of the northwestern part of the Territory.

Sparse clumps of pines, birches, cedars, acacias. Masses of underbrush—blackberry brambles, bindweed, chaparral, pink and white hawthorn, thistles, wild grass, *Cornus canadensis*, knifeweed, euphorbia, white lychnis, wild oats, and *Liatris alba* in soil that is alkaline in some places and marshy in others. He gazes for long moments at the mutant neovegetation mingling with the perennials and self-propagating plants that run rampant in the Territory, spreading via seeds, spores, suckers, rhizomes, buds, stems, branches, nonbranches, hollows, and knots, with pedunculated sheaths or scales and leaves of all colors—gray, purple, green, blue, and yellow; with parallel or intertwined veins; caulinary, alternating, opposed, sessile, pointed, smooth, prickly, whole, hairy; composed of petioled leaves, in rosettes, in leafy buds, halberd-leaved, with needlelike or round petals, parallel stalks rising up and diverging at angles, buds in dense globes in the crooks of the stems, divided into terminal and lateral lobes, or whose lower faces are covered with a pubescent down; with oblong bristles and smooth upper faces; flowering bracts rounded at their pointed tips, wormlike tendrils at the base of their stems or scattered along the lengths; umbels with finely fragmented involucre of bracts ending in bunches at the tips of the stalks, rough or smooth leaf stems, their sheaths jagged like fish bones; some with bristles, panicles separated into husks protecting the flowers; plump stems, narrow ones, bristled, spiny, veined; ribbed or membranous ligules, smooth seed pods and those covered with sharp bristles, four-sided at their bases, rising on their angled stems or attached to floral stalks, compressed, strong, overlapping, and forming a tight raceme; floral ears and reniform seeds, warty, protuberant, oblong, angular, smooth, reticulated, exposing their yellow, brown, black, white, or gray kernels,

straight rows of capsules along floral stems forming pyramidal panicles; carpels in disks, rounded and smooth or rough and thin, tall floral suckers, upright, compact, sometimes glandulous; the white stickiness of milkweed, wild chicory, and euphorbia, distributed throughout the entire structure of the plant by fleshy rhizomes from which new branches spring, the numerous fertile flowering pods of the lush, poisonous vegetation whose venomous stamens lurk just above the ground; the various green tints of the sap of chlorophyll-absorbing plants, the heavier, beige nutrients, anemochoral plants releasing their spores as high as the treetops—poisons are the life of the Territory; poisons are the secret ecology of life; poisons are the natural signs of the Law, as are the various defensive secretions like tannins, ethylene, and the terpenoid substances that the wild plants employ against parasite insects, the nausea-inducing fragrances indicating the presence of wild hemlock, extremely poisonous, sometimes called snake-weed or stinkweed, with its swiveling roots, sometimes branched, atop a stalk rising six or seven feet in height, covered in purple spots and studded with fine-toothed leaves whose veins end in a colorless point contrasting with its bunches of white flowers in large open umbels, small bracts at their bases where the seeds of mericarpel fruits are covered with spines from base to tip; the oily, yellowish gleam of the rhizomic suckers of cicutoxin, as dangerous to animals and men as it is to many other plants; druces of all shapes and volumes, petals of all forms and colors, often divided; unified sepals forming an inflated, veined tube, where calyxes persist in the elongated and spiny lobes, the network expands, floral and semantic; he recognizes species, categories, varieties—grasses, Caryophyllaceae, Amarantaceae, Polygonaceae, Umbelliferae, Asclepiadaceae, composites, Hypericaceae, Euphorbiaceae, Ranunculaceae, Cruciferae. The miniscule jungle of the Territory. Its hidden jungle. The invasion of subterranean rhizome and photosynthesis from the sky—hardy perennials and harmful plants now represent more than half of the surviving wild vegetation. They are to the forest what the last men are to civilization. What remains is evil *by nature*, but even what is evil cannot resist the slow, all-consuming expansion of the desert.

In front of him, a row sparsely covered with a layer of gravel runs alongside a line of blue maples, a mutant species that appeared only within the last forty years or so as far as he knows, and there to the south, almost

as far as the horizon, glitter the headlights of Yuri and Chrysler's pickup truck.

If he can find a way this time, Campbell explains, there will be a huge reward. A 1977 Rickenbacker, a 1988 Gibson Flying V, a Guild semihollow metal guitar from the early 1970s, a Mesa Boogie amplifier, and a Roland RE-501 soundproof echo chamber. They don't function perfectly, of course, but fixing them would be child's play for Link.

No—of course, the true problem is the man who possesses these treasures, and is ready to hand them over if he can recover the use of language. He is a problem, like all the others were.

For now, he can easily repair these simple electric machines that are now being attacked in their turn by the Thing. The machines are still within his reach.

But until now the Thing has managed, thanks to this "second mutation," to widen the gap between itself and him, in a sense that is not biological.

Link is acutely aware of the sharp double-edge of frustration and anger at the center of his attention, his thoughts, his will.

He will not let the Thing get away with this. He will find ...

He will find a way. He will find *the* way.

He will find weakness, and he will strike there with all his might.

Yes, he will find it.

Tonight.

Fat bastard of a Nothingness, he thinks. *I am the mouth, and you are just a boot.*

I will swallow you.

Among the electrical systems to be repaired besides the victim's instruments, there are several machines from Deadlink and Vortex Townships, Campbell says. Microprocessor-based machines that are still suffering the consequences of the first mutation, the one in '63. The trial run.

And then there are the small, simple machines—coffee mills, mini-ovens, radios, batteries, razors, electric lightbulbs, microengines of all types—the sort of thing he sees regularly now. It is all quickly taken care of, as usual.

Link's thoughts are simple: *It will not come between me and electricity.*

Now, though, comes the real problem, descending from the back of the pickup in Yuri's arms.

This problem that, whoever the individual involved, proves every time that the Thing *is* managing to come between men and their language.

Link cannot shake the ephemeral suspicion that the two problems are closely connected.

How many times has he experienced this scene over the past two years? How many times has he had the feeling that he isn't acting, as his father thinks, for the sake of personal gain? He has even saved a few people without receiving anything in return—like the stray adolescent with no family, hardly older than himself, that the two men brought to him one winter night, his entire antileukemia system in arrest; or the young Japanese woman Chrysler knew in a little Ontarian township called LaCrosse Terrain, who had nothing more than a makeshift shelter to live in, whose renal bio-implants had all failed at once, sending her into a hasty physical decline?

Everything has changed in a very short time, with this Third Fall, with the men and women Yuri bring to him in their truck. These humans who are coming face-to-face with their limitations. With their deaths.

The man is standing in front of him, unsteady from the effects of Chrysler's various injections.

A sort of biker. An old Hells Angel from Montreal, Campbell says. He is from a township located just south of the city of Grand Junction. They have managed to learn that he played in one of the very last Canadian rock groups when he was eighteen or twenty years old. He had managed to preserve several twentieth-century instruments but now, stricken by the alphanumeric devolution, he would sell all the Harley-Davidsons and Gibsons on the planet rather than die like a modem.

Link can't say where this sensation comes from, this feeling as if all his thoughts are taking shape within him—a dazzling composition, a summary infinitely greater than the sum of its parts.

It is very simple, very clear, mysteriously obvious.

Until now he has vainly tried the method successfully tested again and again after the '63 mutation: applying his hands to the victim's body, then improvising language, taking possession of the other person's body more or less briefly and penetrating his brain, giving new sense to all the organs that

have become ontologically separate from one another, and then imparting new life to nanorobotic implants and clusters of modified cells.

But that method no longer works at all for the victims of alphanumeric devolution.

And it suddenly seems so logical! How can he hope to fight an entity that attacks language with language itself, human language?

His intuition is so clear, so crystalline. It is all here, right here, surging like a flash of light from the depths of his consciousness.

In fighting human linguistic devolution, neither biological nor mechanical, human language—even glossolalic—is of no use, obviously!

Rather, to combat this symbolic trap—neither biological nor mechanical, but located in the “disjunctive synthesis” of the two—closing in on humanity, on its language, they must use a countertrap that is equally symbolic—neither biological nor mechanical—but that opens up the possibility of language, through electricity, *for machines*. You don’t trap water with water, but with sand. You don’t trap sand with sand, but with trees. You don’t trap light with light, but with a crystal.

One day Yuri told him, laughing, of a rumor they were spreading about a mythical “Anti-Machine” located somewhere in the south of the Territory. It was a decoy, a manipulation, a lie, inasmuch as it had no real value against the biological/mechanical destruction wrought by the first mutation.

But now, with this “intensified inversion,” as Professor Zarkovsky calls it, with this numerization of language, only the electric language of the Machine, only the singular aesthetic tension born of its individuation as *poesis* projecting beyond itself, only the serial chaos of riffs as infinite combinations of the physical, concrete, real uprising of the World of the Machine animated both materially and stylistically by electricity—that is, in a way, *at once specifically and individually*—yes, only the language/electricity of the machine might be able to ...

He has to try. He feels it—yes—there is the weak spot. *He* is the weakness in the Thing’s strategy.

It is the fact that music-making machines are extensions of him. And that he knows their whole language.

He connects the Gibson to the Mesa Boogie. Jack input. Volume turned down almost to nothing, a distant stridence indicating the potential Larsen effect. At first he simply lets his hands rest on the body of the guitar, on the flesh of the machine, with the organic electricity pulsing near the strings.

He understands the meaning of each act as he does it. He no longer needs to touch “human” bodies that are being symbolically deconstructed; he can capture, through simple contact between his body and that of the guitar, and with the aid of his hyperdeveloped intuition, the notes, the sounds, the riffs, the rhythms, the harmonies, the *texts* whose substance is, by nature, the enemy of the anti-substance of the Thing.

The electric language of the infinitely individuated machine against the numeric mechanization of the language of indefinitely divided humans. Yes, that seems to correspond with the concepts his father has been talking to Professor Zarkovsky about. “*Without music, life would be a mistake,*” said a nineteenth-century author he only just discovered.

To which he now mentally adds: *without life, music would be a concept.*

I am the Camp Orchestra. You can kill all of us one after the other, but you can’t kill music, because the Orchestra is not made only of living beings who play, it is also made of all those who died playing.

He needs no physical contact, because the physical will be undulatory, electroacoustic supertension operating in the interface space that connects their two brains; he does not need to use glossolalia, because the texts exist, the words exist, the Word exists, and he is inextricably linked to the very form of the electric fireballs of which he is the halo—the visible trace of the eternal relationship between meaning and symbol.

The hardest one to convince of the reality of his remission ends up being the biker himself—but, as Campbell whispers to him: “Fortunately, the programmable scopolamine will begin to take effect in less than an hour. When I drop him at his house, he’ll thank me for the lift, wondering what bar we met in. And tomorrow morning he won’t remember a thing.”

To which Yuri McCoy retorts: “We, on the other hand, had better not forget anything at all.”

22 > *SECRET TREATIES*

This, it turns out, is the day of the great convergence of catastrophes. The day of darkest secrets, the night of illuminated mysteries.

A day and a night like no other. A day and a night that seem to have been planned long ago, in some bunker now scattered with the sands of time.

Everything seems to have led here, doesn't it? To his last visit to the Hotel Laika, to his meeting with the man from Junkville, who knows one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Territory.

To this very night when, finally, after months of fruitless research, the solution has appeared to him—sudden, brilliant, and pitiless toward all their previous theories, all their presuppositions, all their conclusions, like the precipitous discovery of a new chemical compound.

When he has at last managed to “empty” a man of the digital nothingness invading him.

When, with a simple succession of chords and the soft singing of an old Steppenwolf song, “Born to Be Wild”—practically a hymn to the Hells Angels—he has managed to penetrate a man's neural “black box,” to unlock it and permit the man to resume, undivided, his own process of individuation, cut off by the Thing in its quest to create a monolithic “indivisible” of which the infinite division, paradoxically, is carried out only numerically.

Link knows he is utilizing the concepts of John Duns Scotus, the successor of Saint Thomas Aquinas according to his father and the Professor, who for days have spoken of little other than Scotus and the imminent arrival of the library with all its books, including those of this English Franciscan who developed a theology that alone can, according to them, explain and block the expansion of the Post-Machine. They are concepts that Link understands with a sort of natural ease that surprises no one more than himself—not so much the fact that he is able without difficulty to assimilate the ideas of late-thirteenth-century authors, but the

much more troubling fact that these thirteenth-century men are able to speak to him across a distance of almost eight hundred years, about his own condition and about the current state of the world.

Yes—this is definitely a day for the conjunction of active principles, a day for two complementary parts of a critical mass to be put in place. The detonator is ready; soon the intense brilliance of a whole sun's worth of light will come to irradiate what certainties are left to them.

The convergence of catastrophes. The final human experiment.

The Territory. The library. The Professor. Link and his powers. Yuri McCoy and Chrysler Campbell. The talking dog. The Thing. The secret of the Hotel Laika.

His own secret. The secret that has to do with him. The secret he doesn't know.

Every secret is a clandestine tomb where the truth rests, buried alive for its own protection.

Every secret is a cemetery filled with all those who died for it, or against it.

Every secret is a treaty, signed with darkest night and sealed with the most blinding light there is.

Every secret is a game. Every secret is a weapon. Every secret is a trap. Every secret is a law. Every secret is an act of justice.

That is why, since the dawn of time, true alliances are mystical—why any association of humans coming together to resist one sort of despotism or another form, *de facto*, a “secret society.”

It isn't easy for Link, especially so shortly after the extraordinary experience they have just had. He is still holding the Gibson Flying V in front of his stomach, still strumming the Steppenwolf riff in a semidazed state.

Chrysler has quickly grasped the incredible return to normal of the Hells Angel from Electra Glide. After mastering his astonishment, he asks the man to sit in the pickup's backseat. He attaches several nanomodule connections to the man's body and arranges a scanner around his head, then administers a series of injections.

Meanwhile, Link approaches Yuri and says, his voice scratchy as steel wool: “I need to talk to you. Urgently.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to add, Link. The Camp Orchestra performed brilliantly tonight!”

“It—it’s important, Yuri.”

The redheaded man laughs. “You just found a way to stop the second mutation in a few seconds! You saved the world! You’re right—it is important.”

“It has to do with the Thing, Yuri, but it’s something else.”

“Something else?”

“*Somewhere* else, actually.”

“What are you talking about, Link?”

“It’s somewhere else. A place in Monolith Hills. This place is connected to the end of the Metastructure, and—”

“Oh no, Link, don’t tell me you’re falling for the oldest rumor in the Territory.”

Chrysler Campbell emerges from the truck holding a WiFi micropad connected to his biological operations center, with long columns of numbers scrolling across the screen. Link wonders for an instant just what the data might be, now that the man has been healed. How different might it be from the codes of the human beings who are already dead or dying?

“It’s not a rumor. I went there.”

“You went where?” asks Campbell, his eyes on the small screen with its moving diagrams and lists of numbers.

“That’s what I need to talk to you two about—but Yuri doesn’t want to admit that I’m right.”

“Right about what?”

“The place. The place where I went, the night before the Atlantic storm.”

“What place?” asks Campbell, imperturbably.

“Chrysler,” puts in Yuri, “it’s the old legend of the strip; you know, the hotel the rocket was launched from on the day of the attack ...”

Chrysler Campbell looks disappointed. “We’ve known for a long time that the attack and the Fall of the Metastructure are in no way connected. Just a coincidence of date.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’ve gone there. Several times. And every time I’ve met, or at least seen, Wilbur Langlois’ bionic dog.”

“Balthazar? The old cyberdog?”

“Yes. He’s keeping watch over the place. He goes there regularly, inspects the premises, protects it from looters.”

“Why? That was his old job, before the Fall, wasn’t it?”

“You don’t want to hear me,” says Link de Nova. “You don’t want to see. This place is closely connected to the End of the Metastructure, and the proof is that Balthazar confirmed it.”

“Balthazar believes that ridiculous rumor, too?”

“Balthazar doesn’t believe anything, Yuri; he *knows*. I’m telling you, he confirmed it to me.”

“All he confirmed was that he also believes that fucking rumor, Link. We know every false rumor in the Territory by heart—we *started* most of them, as you’re well aware.”

“Yes, but not that one. Because it isn’t a rumor. It’s a secret.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Yuri ironically, “and Balthazar confirmed it to you.”

“Absolutely. But there’s more. Balthazar confirmed it, but the third man explained it to me.”

There is a crashing silence under the ultraviolet sky where the stars vibrate as if they are about to fall to earth.

“The third man?” repeats Chrysler Campbell, softly.

“Yes, a man from Junkville. A man I’d seen only once before, but that you know well.”

Double crash under the invisible weight of the word. The silence is a curtain of flame, a fireball that would melt any metal.

Chrysler and Yuri stand side by side facing him, the same abrupt understanding mixed with incredulity on their faces, which pale at the same time, even as their gazes intensify coldly.

“Not Pluto Saint-Clair?”

Link de Nova looks at his two friends, saying nothing, knowing his silence is more significant than any response.

Chrysler’s innate practicality allows him to extricate himself from the absolute stillness that has formed all around them.

“I’m going to take this brave Hells Angel home. Wait for me here, both of you. And then, Link, you will tell us everything, in detail. I’d rather not just take it for granted that this is fucking important.”

Link doesn’t reply. He knows very well, given today, just how important it is. He even wonders if his visit to the Hotel Laika and tonight’s miracle might not be linked in some way. A dim impression gnaws at him, a distant interior voice of which only a deformed echo is able to reach him, coming

through an endlessly long tunnel of granite. And the voice says: *Of course the two events are linked. Like all events related to the Metastructure.*

“Pluto Saint-Clair! I’ve been wondering if he was hiding something from us,” sighs Yuri, while Campbell climbs into the pickup’s driver’s seat and the truck’s motor raises its heavy metallic growl.

“Pluto Saint-Clair knows about the Hotel Laika.”

“Link, didn’t you understand? This rumor about the strip is a mirage, a mirage hiding the real secret—the one good old Pluto Saint-Clair wants to keep all to himself—that’s all.”

“That doesn’t matter. He has mapped the places in their entirety and created his own database. Just like you, for the Territory.”

“A database on an abandoned hotel. Ha!”

“It hasn’t been abandoned by everyone. You’ll see.”

“What do you mean? Everyone knows it’s empty, not even a passing refugee ... must be the good old cyberdog’s legendary hospitality.”

Link stares for a moment at Campbell’s truck, now speeding toward the small hills west of the cosmodrome, its headlights turned full south; he imagines the young trafficker, with a passenger who has just awakened to find himself healed of his mysterious illness without any idea of what—if anything—happened to him.

In the Territory, good and evil, death and life, reality and illusion, healing and distress—all are secrets.

“There is a ‘presence’ in the hotel. An invisible presence, but one demanding to be seen. A presence very clearly stating that everything started there. The attack was no decoy.”

“A decoy that cost the life of a rocket and its six occupants, and ultimately put an end to all activity by the cosmodrome.”

“No, Yuri. Space activities were doomed by the Fall; the attack was a sort of fiction, a diversion, a ‘distraction’ that happened while the real intrigue was unfolding in the hotel, but with a whole different scope and different goals.”

“Who would have wanted to kill the Metastructure?”

“You don’t understand—the intrigue didn’t directly involve the Metastructure. Its death, strange as it may seem, was only a side effect, a kind of accident.”

“I hope you’re joking.”

“Not at all. The Fall of the Metastructure was the consequence of a group of processes staged within the hotel. According to what Balthazar and Pluto Saint-Clair told me, the death of the Metamachine and my own birth are two inextricably linked phenomena.”

“What do they know about it?”

“The hotel. Both of them go regularly to the hotel.”

“But you weren’t born in the Hotel Laika!”

“Nobody really knows where I was born. What’s important is not whether I was born in the hotel but the fact that the Metastructure died there, and I have proof. I’ll take you there when Chrysler gets back.”

Yuri lets out a long sigh, but this time he seems to relax, to ease up. It is a pause, a cease-fire. He is ready to take the terrible truth serum.

“This is the most intense night in a long time,” he remarks, simply.

“I think we can safely say it’s only the first in a series.”

The sky, striped with indigo bands, saturated with stars and moonlight, seems present above them for no other reason than to confirm his suspicion.

Earlier in the evening, as he talked with the cyborg dog on the top floor of the Hotel Laika, Link had become aware of several abnormal phenomena that seemed, for some reason, as if they added up to only one.

Ultraviolet radiation streamed from the hotel’s superstructure above them; he could see flying swarms of photons penetrate several open cracks in the hall ceiling.

Other kinds of rays—infrared, gamma, X—followed them through the emergency door in a service staircase leading to the same upper structure.

He realized that the hotel was only swathed in darkness *to human eyes*. In fact, as they climbed from floor to floor he had seen that the darkness was, in fact, filled with light. Light located outside the normal spectrum. Invisible light.

No electrical systems, even the most rudimentary ones, were operational in the hotel—yet through the grilled-off windows between each capsule he caught glimpses of the strip and its masses of refugees, fully lit by spotlights, batteries, gasoline generators, windmills, photovoltaics, simple braziers ... light was not, he saw, dead in Monolith Hills.

But once you arrived precisely here, on the hotel premises, everything went dark. Men disappeared just like electric light sources. The hotel was

like a border—a border between two worlds.

A hotel at the edge of the world. A hotel that had witnessed the gathering of all the genetics that would preside over the End of the World. Yes, it was logical.

A hotel where, Balthazar said, a man came quite often, looking for who knew what, but something that the bionic dog imagined was mysteriously connected to the Fall.

“Who is this man?” Link de Nova had asked.

“You’ll see very soon.”

“Where is he in the hotel, exactly?”

“He has two or three usual haunts—a double room in the eastern corner of the eighth floor. A room here on the tenth floor in the west wing. And especially the dome.”

“The dome?”

“Yes. The roof structure. The filtration dome. It’s there, just above us. He’s up there.”

Link had hardly had time to wonder if the mysterious man knew they were there before the cyberdog answered his unspoken question.

“You’re a lucky boy, Gabriel. I know this hotel like the back of my hand; I’ve been planning tonight for weeks, and you’ve scored yourself a front-row seat. I was waiting for you. I need a human for certain operations. My GPS system doesn’t work in here, unfortunately.”

“How did you know that—”

“You can trust a cyberdog’s hunting instinct. You’ve come here three times in six months, and the incidents are getting closer together. Plus, there’s the weather.”

“Weather?”

“You haven’t noticed? Every time it’s a full moon, or nearly. But I know it has nothing to do with light; I know your night-vision powers. I was expecting you tonight. The operation has been perfectly planned—trust an old member of the Marine Corps.”

“Operation?”

“Yes. Tonight I’m going to trap him.”

All machines are, etymologically, traps. Therefore, every trap is some type of machine.

What makes the trap work is the application of a secret *technology* a language your enemy doesn’t understand, doesn’t know exists, can’t even

conceive of its existence.

A trap is a machine whose language only its creator knows, while it remains a mystery to the future victim.

A trap is a cognitive differential.

Here, the entire hotel is the trap. And Balthazar is its designated expert. There is nothing here he doesn't know about; nothing here can hide for long from the military vision of his amplified eyes—not to mention his other senses.

Nothing can escape his plans.

Nothing can escape his territory.

Not the man in the dome, or anyone else.

“No electromagnetic systems still function in the hotel, of course. So everything is unlocked—locks, doors, emergency exits, stairway doors, emergency nacelles. But there is still the manual emergency system; three of the four access points to the upper structure can be closed. So—I say ‘we,’ because it is clear that this is an operation only a human hand can carry out, and it will be yours, if you don't mind,” the old cyberdog had explained.

“Don't worry, Balthazar. I'll do what you tell me. We'll catch this guy.”

And so they had trapped the man under the dome.

They had taken the one service stairway left open, and soon Balthazar indicated, in a low growl, that they would have to maintain absolute radio silence.

Not another word. The dog was in charge of the operation; Link simply followed along.

It was a world where dogs gave orders to humans. A world where dogs could live to be thirty-five years old and survive two or three wars, while men older than seventy-five died en masse because their transgenic rejuvenation nanogenerators suddenly gave out.

The world he was born into.

He still didn't know to what extent.

What was this?

A sort of nesting structure.

The vast polygon-shaped space of the dome.

And in the middle was a white cube, gray with dust and time.

Massive amounts of invisible rays were shooting from it.

An opening in one of the cube's faces allowed him to see the dark presence of another box inside the box.

An entirely black box.

It was from the black box that the rays were emanating, in every sense.

The dog watched Link in silence. He understood.

The man was in the black box.

It was this cube-within-a-cube that held the secret of Grand Junction.

At that moment, the dog's thirty-five years of training, of combat, of survival, took over. A Marine dog, Link de Nova had thought as he watched him prepare himself calmly for the final assault, standing near the opening of the gray cube. A dog that had been trained to kill, yes, but also to stay alive under any conditions.

A dog that had been trained to fight like a soldier and that had learned, through solitude, to act like a spy, a cop, a creature of the night.

The man in the black box doesn't have a chance, Link had thought, and Balthazar had sprung, silent as a torpedo.

And the man didn't have the slightest chance. He saw nothing, heard nothing, sensed nothing.

When Link entered the cube, ducking under an old vinyl flap, the dog was standing with his back turned, speaking to a prone silhouette at the other end of the room:

"You are in a protected, code-orange zone of the city of Grand Junction, a sector temporarily placed under the functional control of the office of the sheriff of the county of HMV. Are you aware that you have violated a Territory law?"

Link stood at the cube's dark entry, watching the scene with a mixture of curiosity and fascination.

The man on the floor was wearing an enormous pair of tomographic positron binoculars that covered the entire upper half of his face. Link recognized them; they were part of a lot of high-tech objects Yuri and Campbell had brought to him for repair almost two years earlier.

The black cube was empty. Almost empty.

Link noted the presence of a few small computer devices around the room, unconnected to one another or anything else. They looked like the vestiges of a machine that *used to be there*.

And next to the man with the binoculars, there was ... this machine?

A sort of aqualung. A humanoid exoform. Link could see a large bundle of cables that formed an umbilical cord, neurospinal in this case, connecting the aqualung to an interface in the wall.

He could also see a device the man with the binoculars had managed to place between the aqualung and his binoculars—a box with pulsing diodes.

Had he been trying to see inside the machine?

Then Link realized that the man had begun to speak.

“Keep your cool, dog from the office of the sheriff of HNV, sir. It isn’t a crime to investigate the origins of the entity that succeeded the Metastructure, as far as I know.”

“Sir, entering an orange zone is a misdemeanor anywhere in the Territory. Even the most recently arrived refugee knows that.”

The dog’s muzzle worked for a few moments, then he added:

“It’s funny—I don’t know, but I think I’ve smelled your odor before, in Heavy Metal Valley, though I hadn’t made the olfactory connection then. Who are you?”

The man sighed, disconnecting the various attachments from his binoculars. “The boy knows me. He saw me once, in Bulldozer Park ...”

The binoculars were lowered.

“... with his two buddies from Junkville.”

“Oh, yes; that’s it. It was in Bulldozer Park that I registered your olfactory imprint. And you’re a friend of Chrysler Campbell and Yuri McCoy?”

“I’ve been one of their informants for years. It was through me that Professor Zarkovsky came here.”

“He’s telling the truth, Balthazar. His name is Pluto Saint-Clair, I think. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right. And you must be the person they come to see regularly to have machines healed, aren’t you?”

In a fraction of a second, Link realized that the secret of his existence was now well known.

This man knew, or he had guessed.

He was dangerous.

Chrysler had said to him once, "Never hesitate to take advantage of fear. Fear is a language. A language that kills thought. A language that kills will."

"I'm sure you know what Chrysler Campbell does to the people who benefit from my abilities. Remember, he would do much worse to anyone who said a word about it."

Later, the man replaced his binoculars, and they resumed the conversation.

Three creatures of the night in the middle of the night. Three creatures on the edge of the world, in darkness filled with light only they can see, each by his own method, each with his machine.

This time, they went straight to the heart of the problem. The dog cut right to the bone.

"I'm not asking how you knew her, but I want to know, very exactly, what she told you, Mr. Pluto Saint-Clair."

"That's what I'm trying to explain. Just before the Fall she was hiding in the north of the strip; she had managed to escape the hell of Solar System. She chose her own clients, her own motels, her schedule, et cetera. The Laika was one of her favorites. The manager was easily corrupted; she did what she wanted here. She was the one who told me a strange incident had happened in the hotel, and that she was almost positive it had led to the death of the Metastructure."

"What happened in the hotel?"

"She didn't want to tell me. She said I wouldn't believe it. She just talked about beings of light."

Balthazar was quiet. Link noted his prolonged silence.

"But she also told me things ... that Gabriel should know."

"What things?" barked the dog.

"That old hooker assured me you knew a lot about it, Mr. Dog from the Sheriff's Office, and I'm tempted to believe you're hiding a lot as well. She told me that the phenomenon that killed the Metastructure had also created a very young child. A child that was adopted by an android, a female android who found him under the abandoned interchange at Dead-link. Is that clear enough?"

Oh yes, thought Link de Nova, paralyzed. It was all clear, in this artificial light bathing the three living beings, human or not.

It was clear that he knew many things.

Too many things.

* * *

“I’ve been mapping this fucking hotel for weeks, especially the part here under the dome. I’ve analyzed every cubic centimeter. Tonight, using an interface I monkeyed with a bit, I managed to see what is really inside the iron lung.”

“And what is that?”

“Nothing. But I knew that already. What really interested me tonight was the interface in the wall.”

“Why?”

“Whatever killed the Metastructure came from this exoform, and then was swallowed up into the network by this high-speed interface.”

“How do you know?”

Pluto Saint-Clair cracked a smile of pure pride. “Because I saw it. Because it’s still there. Like a fossil. Even a digital machine like the Metastructure leaves a trace of its passage, especially with a catastrophic death. A digital trace, but a trace. If you look closely at the inside of the iron lung, you’ll understand.”

Link and Balthazar looked at each other, then at Pluto Saint-Clair, then at the iron lung, and finally at the little gleaming plaque on the wall to which the cord was connected.

“I’ll go first,” Balthazar said.

Link did not reply. He knew whatever he said wouldn’t matter.

Lot’s wife wasn’t among the first ones to turn, but that hadn’t kept her from being turned into a pillar of salt.

They saw it.

Yes. It was Her.

A fossil trace. Pluto Saint-Clair was right about that. But She was there.

They could see her in the hole. They could perceive her.

They could make her out by her active absence, like a black hole. It was a sort of world-box, but one that contained all *worlds from the inside*.

It was the astonishingly alive trace of the death of the Metastructure.

It indicated a sort of paradoxical “presence” that developed in the same process as its annihilation, and that now, without being truly visible, was located in a dimension made barely perceptible by the senses. It had no form, no color, no sense, no substance—but nevertheless it existed; it possessed its own identity.

It was Her.

The Thing.

It was there.

Or rather, it had been there.

And now it was everywhere.

It had come from a simple hotel, and now it was turning the whole world into its habitat.

It had come from a humanoid exoform, and now it was entering into all men.

It had come from this cube-within-a-cube—it had come from this black box open to infinity—and now it was turning every brain into an indivisible box that enclosed the self inside a process of *undefined* division.

It had been here; it had passed through here. It was born here.

It was born here, at the exact place and time the Metastructure died.

And I was born with it.

I was born with the death of the World.

23 > *RULES AND* *REGULATIONS*

He has been following the red Buick all morning. It wasn't preplanned; he came across it in Junkville, and that had been enough. It is the First Rule of the Territory: missing your chance means you lose.

Chrysler had gone to see a new informer among the population of American refugees in New Arizona; Yuri was out on his motorcycle, making a tour as far as Champlain Banks. After a night like the previous one, he deserved half a day of rest. He had passed Tin Machine, and there was the car. The Buick.

The red Buick of the man looking for the Professor. The red Buick of the man who had been spying on them in Carbon City. The red Buick of the man who is snooping around far too close to their secret. The red Buick of the man whose path he is crossing much too often.

There wasn't even a conscious decision. The walk around Lake Champlain was immediately forgotten, and the moving red glitter of the Buick became, in a split second, the sole focus of his interest. The man had broken one of the Territory's unspoken laws. He was poking his nose into something that didn't involve him.

Who are you? What do you want? Who are you looking for? Why?

Yuri is already imagining the barrage of questions that will be aimed at the man when he is alone between him and Chrysler. He imagines the man's face as he stares down the barrel of the Sig Sauer P226 or the equally welcoming Beretta M92. He imagines the guy's head after Chrysler has unloaded the first round of shot into that face.

Oh yes, he'll talk.

He obviously has a lot of interesting stories to tell.

Chrysler will know how to stimulate the narrative flow.

* * *

Around ten o'clock the Buick, which has been parked for almost an hour in Neo Pepsico, starts north again and drives up one of the hills of the rich township of Little Congo.

Yuri consults his notes.

Nothing, except that during this morning the guy has crossed the whole city and seen more than a dozen people.

In Vortex Townships he met up with an old hooker Yuri had finally managed to place: Ariane Gallagher, an old habitué of Flesh Market, undoubtedly one of the guy's ex-employees. In the same district, a little farther south, the man had talked with a group of young losers who sometimes worked as informants for the necro Triads.

In Carbon City, he had seen two old homosexuals who shared a Combi-Cube—Rondeau and Marston, professional blabbermouths. Nothing that happened in Junkville is unknown to them; people say they know when you get up in the middle of the night to take a leak.

East of Toy Division the man spoke briefly with a few barely postpubescent whores, and at greater length with a trio of young pimps who, it is said, will rent themselves out for a quick, well-executed hired killing here and there.

Then, in Neo Pepsico, the man met up with a bunch of people Yuri couldn't place—except for the last one, an old cop for the municipality of Grand Junction, one Johnson Belfond, who has a reputation as one of the most pompous blowhards in the whole Territory.

All in all, it is a list of the crème de la crème of the city's dregs, like a dinner menu from Hell, as if the Buick's owner is getting ready to cook the worst kind of feast.

He must have started his day in Tin Machine, where Yuri ran across him. That part of his doings is still a mystery.

But here, here in Little Congo among the kings of Junkville, who is the contact of the man in the Buick? Who is his sous chef in Hell?

And why?

If Yuri was the wind blowing through the region, he would be able to float invisibly up to the peak of the butte, brush the aluminum surface of the

luxury mobile home, and enter it through a half-open window. He would be able to see, to listen, to understand.

Two men. One of them is the fellow with the red Buick. And his partner in conversation has a digitally rebuilt face, a body amplified with transgenic cosmetics. Functionally androgynous. The man-woman from Neon Park.

If he was a breeze, he could just be there. He could touch them, feel their skin, dry their sweat, take on their presence, mingle with their odors, guess their most secret thoughts.

Two men, face-to-face, seated in comfortable armchairs of Italian design from the early part of the century—they must have cost a small fortune at the time, and today they are worth the price of half a township.

Two men who have sealed a pact. Two men who have set their own rules. Two men separated by everything, but brought back together by a vital principle.

“Very expensive. How does this antiviral nanogenerator work?”

“It works perfectly, Mr. Silverskin. Not a problem in a month.”

“That was my minimum guarantee, Vegas. If it had broken down any sooner I would have been much more generous.”

“It might have been worth more. ... I don’t have more than a liter of gasoline left, and I have to drive a lot to finish your assignment. I’m making the rounds of Junkville several times a week.”

“Don’t worry about that. If you need a few gallons from Reservoir Can I’ll take care of it. I won’t leave you short of gas for the investigation. About that—I hope you’ve got good news for me.”

A sigh. The exchange of two gazes that come from opposite poles of the same planet. The planet of betrayal, the planet of lying monkeys, the planet where human flesh is bought and sold, certainly—but one of them is playing the dominant role here, and the other one is the dominated. We’ve regressed to tribes of animals.

“I put ten more people on the case this morning. There were already almost that many scouring Junkville and its environs to find these two young guys. I couldn’t see them too well because of the sandstorm, but we caught the other one, the big guy in black from Midnight Oil.”

“I know. You told me two weeks ago.”

“We won’t leave a stone unturned, Mr. Silverskin. We’re following him and making note of all his movements.”

“Anything new there?”

“Not really; he keeps going regularly to the north of the Territory, to the Monolith Hills strip. He also visits an area near Neon Park. We know he has some connection to the Professor, but we still don’t know where, how, or when the tie was established.”

“Neon Park ... that’s in the east-central part of the Territory. It’s totally deserted and slightly radioactive. It used to be a high-tech area. A much more likely place, if you ask me, to hide what we’re looking for.”

“We don’t really know what we’re looking for, Mr. Silverskin; remember that.”

“You should get your hands on these two guys with the pickup right away, Vegas.”

“I’m sure I’ll have some news for you soon, Mr. Silverskin. I don’t know exactly what they’re making, or where they’re from, but someone will have seen them somewhere in the Territory and remembered them, and what they do, and even where they live.”

“I don’t think these men are from Junkville.”

“It’s possible, but they seem to know the city extremely well.”

“These guys are a lot more important than your fellow from Midnight Oil. I’m sure they’re sort of bodyguards for the Professor. His personal escort. If you find them, you find him. Simple as that.”

If Yuri was a gust of wind, even one carrying all the fragrances of Junkville, he would immediately know that even the most adroit conspirators make mistakes. He would know that a man who lives by fear is its primary potential target. He would know that the mistake is even greater in that it hides the essential truth.

He would be able to count the seconds of silence before the man with the red Buick begins speaking again.

“You haven’t ever really explained to me, even when you first sent me on the hunt for the nanogenerator, why the Professor interests you so much.”

“For the same reason as you, Vegas.”

“But I don’t have a reason to chase him anymore—you’ve given me an entirely new biosystem—”

“Vegas, I already told you—all I know how to do is delay failure for a little while. I can’t guarantee anything beyond a few weeks. The Professor probably knows that.”

“But what does he know?”

“Haven’t you noticed that it’s been two or three years of rumors swirling around the Territory about people who are being immunized by who knows what, or who ... and for months people have been talking about a mysterious ‘antimachine’ hidden somewhere in the south of the Territory ... and now this Professor has arrived in Junkville who was one of the Metastructure’s designers ... do you still not see, Vegas?”

“He ... he’s the one who ... made it?”

“Obviously. Imagine, Vegas, the power and wealth of anyone who could control this anti-machine.”

“You mean, control the Professor?”

“That is exactly why I’ve given you this mission. First we need to locate him, as fast as possible. Then we need to monitor him day and night. We have to know the smallest detail of what he does. We have to spy on him until he tells us the location of his antimachine without knowing he’s doing it. Then we act.”

Vegas understands. He nods his head, mechanically, at the obviousness.

Everything happens very fast.

First he sees the man leave a luxury mobile home of anodized aluminum.

Then he sees him get behind the wheel of his car.

Then he sees the red Buick cautiously descend an access road from the top of the butte.

The Buick drives to the road that leads from Little Congo to Vortex Townships on one side and Windtalker Alley on the other. It turns east, toward Windmill Park.

He starts up his Kawasaki.

And everything comes apart; in an instant, everything erupts:

He puts the bike in motion, his eye fixed on the red Buick as it heads east of the city—he follows it at a safe distance of barely thirty meters—in the rearview mirror is the image of a topaz yellow Toyota pickup—he has already seen it this morning, in Vortex Townships; it has the distinctive mark of the necro Triads—and he has seen it again since then, parked for five or ten minutes not far from the butte, before the Buick drove away—so he is being followed—he follows the red Buick, but someone else is following it, too—or following him, rather—yes, that’s it, dammit—the man in the red Buick must be having him watched by men trained to follow

his every movement—this fucking patsy is watching his back—not like him, alone with his Kawasaki—now he'd better act, fast, very fast, and well, very, very well.

He'd better do what Campbell would do.

He'd better act without the slightest conscience.

The trap: the good old plan of the route northeast of Deadlink. Then Row 299. Then Neon Park; he'll lose them there, leave them believing that he lives around here, or at least spends a lot of time here.

The trap has been tested. Verified. Verified again. Campbell never leaves anything to that foolish god Luck.

The trap is part of the Territory, the purest emanation of it. It uses him but in return he will use it, because in the Territory traps are a form of life. The whole Territory is a machine. A trap.

The fundamental Law of the Territory can be summed up in a few words: Cheat or be cheated. It's no worse than any other law.

He drives behind the Buick to the junction with Tin Machine, where he lets it continue east while he turns north, toward one of the still-usable bridges that spans the old highway. In the rearview mirror he can see the Toyota swerve toward Tin Machine in its turn.

Someone is definitely following him.

He will have to lose this pickup and its occupants.

He is in danger.

There are many rules in the territory. Chrysler taught them to him a long time ago. Some of these rules let you ensure your daily survival. The ordinary ones. Others, more rare, are there to guarantee your survival in case of extraordinary events, unusual ones, out of the norm, unforeseen.

Yuri knows the territory like the back of his hand, but he quickly realizes that the occupants of the pickup aren't amateurs, either. Nothing to do with the red Buick. Of course, the Toyota isn't as high-performance as Campbell's huge vehicle, but it definitely outweighs Yuri's little motorbike.

He rapidly sees that they aren't trying to avoid being seen. They're sticking to him from two hundred meters behind, and they aren't doing a thing to stay invisible. *They're fucking themselves*, he thinks, as he passes in

front of the abandoned interchange at Deadlink with its masses of refugees in their collapsible shelters.

And if they're fucking themselves, they probably have a plan, too.

A plan he knows.

First rule: Always know, or guess, your adversary's plans.

Second rule: Never let the adversary know, or guess, yours.

Third rule: Think deeply, act fast, disappear even faster.

Fourth rule: Strike first, strike hard, strike to the heart.

And finally the fifth rule, taken from the Special Forces manual: If your attack is going pretty well, it's an ambush.

Hard cases, thinks Yuri. He has tried everything—leaving the row, taking just barely navigable roads, half-turning to the south, turning north again, regaining the road that leads west, reentering the row, and speeding east toward Neon Park.

They won't let him go. They stick to their plan. Very well, thinks Yuri. Don't forget the rules of survival in the Territory.

If your attack is going pretty well, it's an ambush.

For now their attack is going pretty well. Their plan is working perfectly.

Now it's up to him to turn it into an ambush. To set a trap for them. To make a machine.

He knows their plan; it's the one he and Chrysler use to lose their pursuers. He knows how to act to foil this plan. All he's missing are the things most important for a successful operation.

Weapons.

In its side compartments, the Kawasaki has only medical materials and a military Taser with a voltage controller. It would be quite a procedure to carry out emergency modifications to it. A simple Taser and a few hypodermic syringes! The others are probably armed, not to mention the fact that their vehicle could inflict devastating damage on any motorbike—and any human body.

Chrysler told him once that the fifth rule signifies that a plan, even the best one, may quickly display its limitations. And that the surest way to counteract a plan is to let your adversary believe it is working.

He approaches Neon Park, still making fruitless attempts to leave Row 299, lose his pursuers, and return. It is only a decoy, part of his counterplan. He has to make them believe he is at the end of his resources, that he no longer knows what to try, that he is vainly repeating the same maneuvers, that he has no chance to get away.

That he will end up running out of gas.

Rule number six: Jujitsu, Bushido, aikido. Use your adversary's strength against him.

Rule number seven: Learn to see your own weaknesses as unforeseen opportunities for your adversary. Turn his shortcomings into assets. Transform his most obvious strengths into handicaps.

Rule number eight: Don't do what is expected, especially by you. Know how to display a false repetition of routines, the better to break it at the opportune moment. Conceive of the effect of surprise not as a simple thunderbolt limited in time, but as a long-lasting barrage of fire.

Rule number nine: Imagine all the possibilities, but once a decision is made, never back down.

Rule number ten: Don't forget any of the previous rules.

The trap worked.

Hard-asses, thinks Yuri, but nobody in the Territory can fight Chrysler Campbell and his teachings.

The Kawasaki is parked in the middle of Row 299, just past a bend at the edge of Neon Park, between two wooded hills. Here there is still vegetation—chaparral bushes, trees, bindweed brambles, masses of blackberry bushes, wild roses, erigeron, ambrosia, wild mustard and Canadian goldenrod mingled together, and tumbleweeds rolling through the dust and past holes filled with tall wild grasses. Plenty of places to hide from the Toyota's occupants. The hardy, injurious plants of the Territory can fulfill that role to perfection.

Their plan works perfectly, too. *Pretty well, indeed.*

The Kawasaki has broken down, and its driver must have fled into the surrounding countryside nearby.

So we get out of the pickup, our guns in plain view.

Yuri can see a machine gun in the hands of a huge African American dressed in the yellow-and-black uniform typical of the Vortex Triads who has just extricated himself heavily from the passenger seat.

A blond dressed in red from head to toe has already emerged from the driver's side, holding a big aluminum-colored snub-nosed revolver.

The plan worked really well. If we don't trap him right away, all we have to do is wait for him to come back. He can't leave his bike in the middle of the road forever.

The men make a small tour of inspection around the small neighboring buttes, glancing briefly at the Kawasaki, holding a brief consultation that they continue as they head back toward their vehicle.

If your attack is going pretty well, it's an ambush.

If man is the most terrible of predators, it is precisely because he has a strong awareness of the morality of his actions.

This "moral conscience" serves as a natural barrier against the most murderous instincts that can arise in any animal.

But man is not just an animal. His "moral" conscience is there less to prevent him from regressing to his most primitive levels than to keep him from reaching an often-unknowable stage *above* his strictly human condition.

The simple animal impulse is what allows men to kill.

But what is located a notch *above* moral conscience, what suddenly emerges once the natural barrier is breached, is much more terrifying.

Because it isn't just about killing, even in the rage of legitimate defense or in the cold cruelty of the carnivore playing with its prey before devouring it.

It is about killing as invisibly, secretly, *technically* as possible.

It is about treating assassination as one of the Beaux Arts.

An exact science, Chrysler would surely call it.

Exact, the science.

Technical, the trap.

Very beautiful, the art.

Very simple, the blow.

Very simple, truly.

“... or maybe he went to some hideout in Neon Park,” the enormous black man is saying as he climbs back into his seat.

“You want to go all the way there? I don’t know the area too well; do you?”

“Not really, but if we drive fast we can probably still catch him on the road.”

“What should I do, smash his fucking motorbike on the way?” demanded the driver, putting the key in the ignition.

In your dreams, my friend, says Yuri silently, sitting up from his hiding place underneath a pile of objects in the pickup’s backseat.

He is already in “automatic mode.”

Once you have begun to act, finish as quickly as possible. Once you have thought of what to do, do it without another thought.

The Taser flashes against the back of the big black man’s shaved head, voltage turned up to maximum. Distance: zero centimeters. The man emits a low groan and loses consciousness, his body twitching violently. He’ll have one hell of a concussion later, and probably much worse.

In the same fraction of a second, Yuri’s left hand presses the release of a hypodermic syringe he has pressed against the back of the driver’s neck, its projection force set as high as it will go. The tiny arrow of titanium and glass-composite shoots in one end of the blond man’s throat and out the other, punching a hole in the spinal cord and vertebral column before pulverizing his Adam’s apple. A little blood spatters the windshield in fine droplets.

There.

That’s the end of that.

Very simple. Very quick. Very lethal.

The two men slump slowly forward in the same strangely synchronous movement, as if manipulated by an invisible puppeteer.

Yuri gets out of the Toyota, maintaining a careful grip on the two objects that have just bestowed death with surgical precision, as if they were talismans dedicated to a deity he knows only too well. His hands are perfectly steady. His heart is still and calm, as if encased in a block of ice. His brain is an impeccable, translucent sphere absorbing all the universe’s radiation.

Never believe that killing someone makes death your friend, Chrysler told him once. *That’s the most common mistake. Remember, death by definition*

doesn't have any friends, any human allies, because it always finishes by carrying them off sooner or later.

To kill someone, he said, is paradoxically to bring yourself as close to death as possible while also maintaining an infinite distance from it. It doesn't become your friend; on the contrary, it becomes more and more of a stranger to you. Like a lover, or a spouse, who moves farther away the closer you try to get to it.

The sun is exploding in the turquoise sky, a golden furnace tinting everything within reach of its rays with silvery light, applying to every morsel of rock the geometric and brilliant perfection of a block of diamond, causing waves of heat to rise from the earth and giving every substance, vegetable or mineral, the very texture of the day, the very form of beauty.

Including the pickup.

The pickup containing the two men he just killed.

Automatic mode. Automatic mode. Act fast, disappear fast, turn your counterplan into a long-term ruse. Think deeply. Act fast.

He just killed two men.

Well, at least one of them, the African American giant, might have survived the direct electric shock to his head.

Think deeply, act fast, strike hard.

If the man isn't dead, he'll be able to give a description of Yuri—and whoever these guys are really working for, Yuri isn't eager to be in his sights.

Notwithstanding the fact that he might already be there.

Given his constitution, the huge black guy has a small chance of surviving the Taser's electric shock. It isn't his lucky day.

Because he is in automatic mode—think deeply, act fast, strike hard—he is under the commandment of the Rules of the Territory.

These men failed; they didn't follow him.

It's the Territory that killed you, he thinks. I was only its instrument. He rummages hurriedly in the Toyota's cab for their weapons and ammunition, including a Nepalese combat dagger with a curved blade in a leather scabbard shoved between the two front seats. He takes everything, stuffs the items into the side bags of his motorbike, then stares for a second at the pickup containing the men who couldn't measure up to the Territory. Dead

or alive, they have to disappear, and fast. And if one of them is still alive, he has to die, just as quickly.

So he empties a full twenty-liter can of gasoline, found in a corner of the pickup's rear bed, over its entire surface—roof, doors, hood, radiator grille, front tires, and, in great splashes, the interior of the cab and the men themselves. The big black man stirs weakly, muttering a mostly inaudible complaint; Yuri makes sure to drench him even more completely with the gasoline.

He keeps just enough fuel to top off his motorbike's tank. He has already chosen the exact spot where everything will disappear. Nothing is left but to enact the Law of the Territory.

It's perfectly simple.

It will be technical, medical, precise. Campbell would appreciate it. The Rules are being respected, as they should be.

It will be weeks before anyone finds the vehicle and the burned bodies, or longer if they're devoured by a pack of roving animals in the meantime, or another blizzard or sandstorm covers their resting place with a heavy white carpet.

It's this kind of thinking that constitutes the perfect nonanimalness of human murder.

Animals have no Law. It would never occur to any of them to camouflage the remains of a feast. Men have Laws. Laws of which the First One is that they are made to be broken. Men follow the Rules. Rules governed by a single Law: The only Rule that counts is the one made by the survivor.

The truck catches fire as it crashes to the bottom of the rocky ravine in a fracas of metal exploding under its own weight. Jets of sparks. The orange and blue pyrotechnics of gasoline in full combustion. Then the explosion of the gas tank. The fire spreads to a few shrubs and some underbrush, but the chances that the flames will grow into a detectable fire are very slim.

All the Rules are being obeyed.

It is the first time Yuri has killed a man, let alone two at once.

The men didn't see anything, hear anything, sense anything. He acted with the military precision of a cyberdog.

They had followed him after marking him out and, confident of success, they hadn't even tried to hide themselves from him. They had followed him, but he was the one who trailed them, who led them in every sense of the

word. They had had a plan, but it had never occurred to them that their plan would be anticipated.

They had had a plan.

And their plan had killed them.

24 > *SATELLITE OF LOVE*

The telescope is pointed toward the equatorial orbit, taking in the growing activity there.

In the black denseness of the spatial night, the slow ballet of stations and cargo ships coming together and moving apart again resembles a mechanical game suspended in the glaring solar light, unfiltered by any atmosphere, striking like that of a thermonuclear superbomb one hundred and fifty million kilometers away.

They're still going, she thinks. They aren't stopping.

Every day. Every hour. It never stops. They are creating superstations, attaching automatic cargo ships to hydroponic production domes, joining satellites to knots of capsules, gathering groups of orbiters.

Why?

She has spent the whole day watching the sky, noting anything remarkable in it, recording on high-definition tapes the visual evidence of this abnormal orbital activity.

Her military-communication microstation has been broadcasting the same message in a loop for days, its parabolic antenna pointed toward that part of the sky from which she can logically expect a response.

For days the message has played over and over in the emptiness, the great emptiness between the stars.

For days only the silence of those same stars, the silence of the same emptiness between them, has replied to her.

For days she has simply been watching.

And then, suddenly, the machine emits a weak sputter, the small screen of its speaker vibrating.

Someone is talking.

Someone is telling her something.

Someone is saying that there are still people in the Ring who don't want to abandon the Earth.

She doesn't respond to the male voice from outer space. Mass electromagnetic interference, the rotation of the Earth and the Ring, asynchronicities, the barely passable quality of the instruments. She just has time to hear what the man from space says.

There are still people in the Ring who don't want to abandon the Earth.
Encouraging, she thinks.

But it gives sudden, precise meaning to all the orbital maneuvers she has been watching for so many weeks.

There are still people in the Ring who don't want to abandon the Earth.
That means that all the others intend to abandon it for good.

"They didn't even tell you their name?"

Link is standing in Judith's little observatory, having just taken his eye away from the telescope's eyepiece. The sky is very black above them, the stars in the Milky Way and the metallic points of the Ring burning like meteors about to crash into the Earth.

He has just come back from the Hotel Laika, where he took his two friends from Junkville, and where they learned the secret of the place. He has just healed a man stricken by the Third Fall. He has just thwarted the entity that intends to make each man into its numeric residence.

"They communicate with a mixture of voice and teletext; the interference doesn't allow long exchanges. All I know is that their old Israeli three-seater is called *Tchekna*, or something like that."

Link manages to keep his eyes fixed on the young woman for a few seconds. Judith appears surrounded by an ultraviolet glow; his innate night-vision bioprogram makes her into a sort of creature of light standing on the translucent surface of the veranda. Link forces himself to turn his gaze away, to hide from her the damned thudding of his heart. Nothing is happening. Everything is 100 percent normal. Everything is fine. Don't think. Keep talking like nothing is wrong.

"Why did they tell you they didn't want to abandon the Earth?"

Judith measures him coolly with her violet eyes. "Can't you guess?"

"It has something to do with that mess up there, right?"

"Link ... if they're making the effort to tell us they won't abandon us, you can draw a logical conclusion from it, can't you?"

Judith Sevigny is as hard as a diamond. She doesn't even realize what she is doing to the poor piece of glass named Gabriel Link de Nova.

Link tries to hold her lilac gaze. He feels as if he is literally melting on the inside. His voice is low, cracked, barely audible:

"Do you know where and when the people in the Ring are planning to leave?"

Judith gives him a smile that completes the process of internal liquefaction.

"That's one of the questions the microstation has been transmitting on loop since last night," she answers.

Link is quiet for a long moment. Violent feelings are swirling inside him in opposing directions. Good News is mingling with Bad, forming a dual Gemini, a horrible twinning that surges out of this magnificent golden night like a maleficent, unexpected constellation.

He has succeeded in vanquishing the Thing, in stopping its "Third Fall," with music, with sonorous electricity, with a machine endowed with language. With the language of the individual, with the very process of individuation, with the infinite univocity of which he is a witness, with the *voice-electricity-music-sense* of the one who plays, as well as the one who listens.

And at the same time, the men who survived all of it in the Ring are making the decision to leave orbit for an unknown destination.

The moon? Mars?

Far away from Earth, in any case.

Far away from what is left of Earth.

Far away from the Thing.

Far away from all of us.

The Council is planning to meet at five o'clock in the afternoon. As far as he knows, Campbell refused the initial meeting time of noon because of things he is working on that cannot be delayed. But they will be there at five.

Link goes back to see Judith in her observatory. He slept badly. A black shadow, blacker than any known darkness, infiltrated his sleep, covering the horizon of his dreams.

Judith is still watching the sky, waiting for a response from the Ring, waiting to hear again the voice of the astronaut who doesn't want to abandon the Earth.

"They sent me a compressed audio file in their last message."

"An audio file?"

"Yes. I got some information and a song."

"A song?"

"They told me I would understand."

Through one of the veranda's glass walls, Link sees Sheriff Langlois talking to his main deputy, Slade Vernier, as they walk toward Bulldozer Park. Toward the school bus that is the city hall. Toward the rendezvous point.

It is a Security Council. Only accredited members of the county general staff are invited. Neither he nor Judith can participate. Nor can his mother, or the parents of the young girl, or the Sommervilles. Only the sheriff, Vernier, Professor Zarkovsky, Link's father, and Father Newman are authorized to be there, and of course Yuri and Campbell. It was Sheriff Langlois who made the decision. Security Councils are his responsibility alone. It is one of the intangible Laws of Heavy Metal Valley.

Link remembers the pact he made with Chrysler and Yuri the night before, after he told them the story of his adventure in the Hotel Laika and then drove them there.

"We won't tell anyone about this, or about the fact that your 'musical medicine' was successfully tested tonight," Campbell had said. "We'll keep going like before; *total secrecy*, okay? Concerning the Laika, the dog will keep silent as he has done until now. And as for Pluto Saint-Clair, tomorrow I'll make very sure he understands that silence is gold, and chitchat is lead. Confidential defense, everyone understand?"

But Judith is letting him watch what happens in the Ring; she has shown him the tapes and let him listen to her recordings of the voices from space.

She is sharing her secret with him.

He knows that all true loyalty has a counterpart of betrayal. He knows that the truth only survives, sometimes, through manipulation. He knows that most secrets have no purpose except to hide other, deeper ones.

So he looks at the beautiful young woman with the violet eyes. He manages to keep his cardiac rhythm somewhat normal. He even curves his lips in the approximation of a smile.

Then he says he has to tell her something.
Something important.
Important for all of them.

* * *

“The Gaspé Peninsula? Why not Newfoundland? Or James Bay while we’re at it?”

Campbell’s voice is slightly ironic, but he remains serious, his face grave. It is his bad-day attitude.

The sheriff is his usual self. The match started in the first second, obviously, Yuri muses to himself.

“Shut up. I doubt you know the exact situation in the Atlantic Provinces.”

A sigh of exasperation from Campbell. This is going to be a good game, thinks Yuri.

“Fine; listen, Sheriff, I probably know more than you do about it. I have informants all the way to Vermont, and—”

“They’re coming from Maine. And New Brunswick. Bands of neo-Islamists, renegades from various pre-Fall militias, Quebec-independence partisans, pro-American annexists, Canadian federalist-unionists—and they’re all fighting for control of the extreme northeast. And they’re looting, stealing, killing, extorting, without giving any of it a second thought.”

“I know all of that, Sheriff.”

“Yeah, but what you don’t seem to know is that Islamist groups have infiltrated all the way to the Chaudière-Appalaches and New Hampshire. They’ve been seen near Lake Megantic. And there are also those renegades from the old unionist army that hold the center of New Brunswick now. That’s why I ordered them to about-face.”

“About-face?”

“Yes, back to the Nova Scotia border. It’s out of the question for this cargo to fall right into a pirate’s nest.”

“But you want them to pass through the Acadian north—the Gaspé Peninsula?”

“Yep. Then they’ll go directly south, following the Saint Lawrence.”

“They’ll run straight into the dock hunters in the port of Quebec.”

“Shipyard thieves don’t bother road traffic, Campbell. And Quebec is on the other side of the river.”

“You’re wrong on the first point, Sheriff, and you also seem to be unaware of the fact that Quebec is directly connected to the other bank by the Laporte Bridge. That surely isn’t a priority, but if you think the truck can get through any of the cities in the area without attracting any attention or passing any checkpoints, it’s been too long since you left the Territory.”

“Listen to me carefully, Campbell. They won’t pass through the center of New Brunswick. Maine is out of the question. And they must avoid the extreme southwestern tip of Quebec. Do you have another solution to suggest other than having them cross the estuary or go up the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico?”

“There’s nothing left of the Mississippi but a muddy little river in the middle of desert and steppes. All they need to do is carefully avoid the obstacle; that won’t be easy for a heavy truck, but we don’t have any choice. They can go around Quebec via the Notre Dame Mountains. Then they go straight down through the Estrie.”

The sheriff gives a dry, mechanical laugh, like a barrage from a submachine gun. “Right, and they’ll have a nice, calm drive to Montreal and the gangs there. And we’ll find the cargo in a million years, with luck.”

“No, they can’t follow the river; I told you—go *straight down* through the Estrie. Then cut across toward the Territory, south of Cowansville, to the Vermont border. That’s far enough away from your neo-Islamists.”

The sheriff pauses in thought, staring at the huge road map spread out before them on the council-room table without seeing it.

Campbell one, Langlois zero, thinks Yuri.

Yuri wanders among the metal masses of HMTV. They will spend the night here. Then, the following morning at dawn, the escort will leave to meet the convoy.

Sainte-Anne-des-Monts will be the rendezvous point, northeast of Rimouski. Langlois had put his finger there on the map.

Around a thousand kilometers.

Yuri knows it might as well be the distance between two worlds.

He walks toward the west of the city, an area he does not know well. FREIGHTLINER AVENUE, reads a sign made of a truck door, the letters

inscribed with a welding torch. The sun is setting across from him; it lacquers the immense ocean of metal, plastic, and Plexiglas stretching endlessly in front of him with yellow-orange light.

Even after the preliminary discussions, the sheriff hadn't been finished with them. He isn't the sheriff of Heavy Metal Valley for nothing. He isn't the Guardian of the Law for nothing. He hasn't had hundreds of throats cut for nothing.

"Your personal escort, my dear Professor, in addition to that of the truck, will be doubled with a patrol of my tactical intervention men. My main deputy, Slade Vernier, will be there, and the young French sniper Frank Lecerf. I don't think I need to add that these conditions are absolutely nonnegotiable."

"Neither the Gaspé nor the Estrie are part of your jurisdiction, Sheriff Langlois," Chrysler had remarked.

It was then that Yuri had fully realized the strength of the Man of the Law of Bronze.

He *was* the Law.

"This operation goes way beyond the petty administrative problems you keep bringing up, Mr. Campbell. Rest assured that if an investigation or any mission of public order obligates us to go beyond our 'jurisdiction,' as you call it, nothing will stop us from doing it—including the laws that existed ... before. Might be a good idea for you to take another look at your penal code."

Campbell-Langlois: tie game, Yuri had thought.

Yuri is well aware of the mission's dangers. He and Campbell had a lot of time to talk earlier in the day. There are two kinds of danger, Chrysler had said: the danger you underestimate, and the danger you overestimate. Danger you see for precisely what it is, is just a *problem*. A problem implies solutions. Danger involves only risk.

Solar snowflakes of light fall over the Valley of Heavy Metal. Clouds of dancing meteors burst from the piled structures, will-o'-the-wisp fires whose ephemeral sparks pirouette endlessly above the great cemetery of the twentieth century, rays diffracting in echoes of photons that place each texture in harmony with a singular frequency.

It is like a symphony, he thinks, remembering the few pieces of that pre-electric music Link de Nova guards so jealously. There are celestial sources, this starlike, glittering, solar joy; crystalline magnificence, the voices of angels in freefall in skies of fire of this Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; there are fluid lines, liquid, translucent, intertwining like tree branches whose reflections vibrate in the mirrorlike waters of a Nordic lake—Sibelius was the fellow, wasn't he? There is the intangible architecture, illuminated by a thousand moons, this silvery, royal texture, this meteor shower. *Debussy*, he remembers.

It is absolute beauty falling over the world, the same world in which he killed two men this very morning.

It is this absolute beauty that seals off all the secrets of this world.

Now he and Campbell share one more secret—a secret that neither Link de Nova, nor the dog Balthazar, nor Pluto Saint-Clair, nor anyone else knows.

“Both of them?” Campbell had simply asked.

“Yes. Both.”

“How did you do it?”

“I trapped them. I faked running out of gas. I was almost empty anyway. When they checked the tank, they fell for it. I helped myself to a fill-up later.”

“How did it happen? Be specific.”

“They looked for me. I was well hidden, not far away. I hid in the back of their pickup, in fact—it was full of clothes, personal items they must have stolen from corpses, boxes full of who knows what, blankets ... I could hide easily.”

“Then what?”

“Then, I improvised with what I had.”

“Which was?”

“The big Taser from the Texas National Guard and a pistol-projection hypodermic.”

Campbell closed his eyes for a few instants. Yuri knew he was imagining the scene, recreating it mentally, wanting it to come alive from the pieces of information he had.

“Their truck?” he asked.

“Pitched it into a ravine. It burned. They burned with it.”

“They worked for the guy with the red Buick, you said?”

“Yeah, unless he works for someone else.”

“You have any thoughts about that?”

“No, just intuition. He went all around Junkville this morning, and I still can’t figure out why. The pickup started tailing me while I was following him.”

“Which means?”

“He went to see someone very important in Little Congo. I didn’t have the time to find out exactly where, but I thought the guy with the Buick might well be working for him.”

“Doing what?”

“The guy I saw this morning was nothing like the physical wreck from the first time. He’s found some kind of remedy. Temporary, undoubtedly, but effective. Or maybe I should say, someone sold him a remedy. And in exchange, he’s searching all over Junkville and the areas around it. As of this morning he had at least twelve people on the trail.”

“What trail? What is he looking for?”

“I’m not sure, but what happened this morning suggests a conclusion or two. They’re looking for us. *Us*. Because they know we’re the only ones that can lead them to the Professor.”

“The Professor.”

“Yes, it all makes sense; why else were they spying on us from the top of Carbon City? Why did they follow us to Deadlink North?”

“And you think those guys were following you to force you to take them to the Professor?”

“Yes, or to my house, or here to Aircrash Circle. You know the plan; they wanted me to break down, or panic.”

“I understand. And it was the breakdown that got them.”

“Right.”

“You did very well, Yuri,” said Campbell, as if he were talking about the repair of a section of pipe.

Then, calmly, just to be sure that all the Rules had been respected:

“You’re sure you killed both of them? They’re *both dead*, right?”

Yuri didn’t reply. His friend could read in his eyes the truth of just how definitely he had killed them both, just how definitely they were both dead.

In the corner of one green eye lingered the light of that day’s young morning, the last one for those two men who had made the mistake of surviving.

There is metal. There is Plexiglas. There is light.

There is the great orange disk that has just engulfed the horizon, and the long line of violet clouds trailing it.

There is the light of the evening, with the fresh breeze blowing from the northwest.

And there is the light of this morning, etched forever on his memory.

There is metal, Plexiglas, the sun disappearing slowly behind the Earth.

There is light, metal, and he.

And he, walking in this ocean of metal-light, is trying to find meaning in what he did a few hours earlier, a thousand years earlier, when he rose up behind the two men *like a devil from his lair*.

There is the light above him, the bright light of murder.

And there is its manifestation, its real, terrible presence, the scene forever imprinted like a photograph in the darkroom of his brain.

And there, a little to his right and to the north, there is a bright golden flash, a vast, translucent cube shining on all sides, wide surfaces of glass composite that gleam, luminescent, at the same frequency as the metal of twilight.

And the light is not only as bright as that of this morning; it confirms the reign of the technical silence of manipulation, of traps, of death. It sings. It sings out loud.

The light is singing. And as he approaches the source of the light-metal-sound, he can make out more and more clearly just what the great light is singing.

It is singing: *We love you*.

There are some extraordinary moments in existence when everything seems to work together, to illuminate your consciousness like a flash of lightning. Everything converges, everything crystallizes, and finally, everything detonates. It is a process that belongs to the particular chemistry of explosives. Heat, dynamic instability, spark of ignition—nothing remains but for a microelement to come and insert itself into the structure and ... a block of buildings is wiped from the map.

None of these moments can resemble the others. Any others.

Each time, the configuration of events is unique in giving rise to the singular monad that can, every time, contain all the possibilities.

It only takes a little—nothing at all—to partially open a world, to swallow up a consciousness, for a person to lose or find himself.

Light, metal, Plexiglas.

Light, textures, reflections.

Light, matter, air.

Light, a young woman, a young man.

Light, music, a voice.

We love you.

We love you.

We loooooove you. ...

Just now, it seems utterly ridiculous to him.

He killed two men in cold blood only this morning, and now he is confronted with the angst of an adolescent boy.

He is confronted with the same angst as *the adolescent*. Link de Nova.

It has become clear, luminous, blinding, that they are both caught up by the same emotion—or, more exactly, by the same radiant source of that emotion. Its active, living center.

Judith Sevigny.

From where he is, the backseat of an antique Subaru station wagon, he can see the cube of glass, on the veranda, with its parabolic antenna and powerful astronomical telescope, both pointed toward the same part of the sky.

An amateur observatory. Judith Sevigny is watching the stars. The stars must certainly give him to her.

He can see the young girl in lively discussion with the teenage boy, but no sound reaches his ears except the song, played on continuous loop, its refrain echoing over and over: *We Looooove You. ...*

We love you.

He realizes, as if melted where he stands by an intense source of heat, that Judith Sevigny is terribly beautiful; it is almost enough to make him weep.

He realizes that Link de Nova is in love with the girl, and that he is doing all he can to hide it from her—awkwardly, as far as he can tell from his long-distance analysis of the boy's body language.

He realizes that the sunlight of the last hours has made all the creatures peopling this universe even more splendid. Metal, plastic, Plexiglas. Light, matter, air.

And Judith Seigny.

He realizes that the glow of twilight is connected to that of this morning, when he killed two men more icily than a machine. *We Loooooove You*, repeats the old electric-rock refrain.

He realizes that the rays bathing the horizon are the image of his own conscience in this moment, this second that seems to stretch into infinity.

He realizes—light, matter, air, plastic, Plexiglas—that beauty is entering him like a terribly addictive drug.

He realizes, very simply, that he, too, is falling in love with Judith Seigny.

He realizes that he is only a man. He realizes that catastrophes are made to occur in a series.

He realizes that he is alive.

25 > *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

As dawn points its pale muzzle toward the universe, Yuri sees that the sky changed during the night.

A misty veil covers the firmament, completely erasing the stars that can normally be seen at this time of the morning.

To the south, he can see a dark blue line on the horizon. A wave of ink, topped with dots of bronze.

A new storm, he thinks immediately. A new storm rising on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border.

The world certainly isn't going to stop for them.

On the northern horizon is a blue-white cloud. Another huge blizzard is descending across northern Quebec from the Arctic. It will reach the territory in two or three days.

At the same time as the sandstorm coming from the south.

The Territory will be caught in a vice between the two storms, between the howl of the wind and that of the sand, between the worlds of silica and ice.

And at that same moment, they should be in view of their goal.

They should be in view of the truck and its containers.

They should be in view of the library.

He can't bring himself to believe it is a coincidence.

On the previous evening, after Sheriff Langlois, Slade Vernier, and Father Newman had withdrawn from the council room, Campbell had literally attached himself to the duo of Milan Djordjevic and Professor Zarkovsky.

He had gone with them, without even asking permission of any sort, to their "laboratory," a bus filled with unsorted machines of all kinds and origins, intended for various uses.

His presence, hard as flint, was sufficient to make any explanation unnecessary.

He doesn't need a note from his parents, Mr. Professor, Yuri had thought.

“We leave tomorrow morning to fetch your library, a thousand kilometers from here. I hope you’ll provide us with some additional information.”

Mechanically, Yuri had followed two or three steps behind them. In his mind he was still somewhere near Neon Park that morning, killing two men in the cab of their truck.

“What kind of information?” the Professor had asked.

“Am I not speaking English? *Additional information*. Information about the Metastructure, its end, what you call its ‘super-death,’ what we call the ‘Post-Machine.’ The Thing.”

“But what exactly do you want to know? I really think I’ve told you everything, Campbell. What more do you expect from me?”

“What I want to know is—I don’t know yet, otherwise I wouldn’t be pushing for it. What I expect from you is for you to help me find out what I haven’t found out yet.”

Yuri heard Zarkovsky’s deep sigh; Djordjevic had, until then, remained silent. He opened the door of the bus, allowing them access inside the laboratory.

“By any chance, Mr. Campbell, do you want to pursue any of the *theological* discussions we’ve had on this subject?” Link de Nova’s father had asked.

“Exactly, yes. I can’t tell you why, but before we leave I need to complete the picture; there are holes ... you might not fill them all, but I’m asking you to try.”

“Fine,” Djordjevic had said. “I believe Paul Zarkovsky and I are at your disposal. What should we talk about?”

Yuri had shivered, premonition attacking him like a violent chemical reaction.

They “needed” this “information” for “reasons they couldn’t reveal,” said Chrysler.

Which meant that the main, secret objective of his interrogation was what had happened with Link de Nova that night at the Hotel Laika and before that, when the boy’s electric guitar had literally blasted the alphanumeric entity that had taken possession of the old Quebecois Hells Angel.

Campbell had realized that the library was of capital importance. He had realized that despite all his redoubtable abilities, he needed the Professor and Djordjevic.

“So, Campbell,” Zarkovsky had prodded him. “What is this nebulous problem worrying you so much?”

Campbell had hesitated—Yuri was aware of the tiniest shifts in his friend’s body language, and he had never seen him in such a state before.

“Mr. Campbell,” Djordjevic had repeated in his gentle voice, “what do you wish to talk about?”

The neuromuscular tension in Campbell’s head suggested that he was about to speak. Paralyzed, Yuri had realized that he knew exactly what his colleague intended to say.

“I want you to tell us about the Apocalypse. I want you to tell us about this ‘Scotus.’ I want you to explain the ‘principle of individuation’ to me.”

“Is that all?” the Professor had asked dryly. “Years of theology, condensed into a single evening?”

“Spare me your television-era humor. Tomorrow we’re going to be risking our necks for your library.”

“Mr. Campbell, it will be difficult for us—Professor Zarkovsky is right—to summarize such fundamental, complex concepts for you.”

“I can teach you how to kill men in less than an hour. That is fundamental, and it can be very complex. You can do the same thing and teach me how to save them.”

Of this conversation sandwiched between the Security Council and his evening drift toward Judith Seigny’s veranda-observatory, Yuri remembers only bits of varying lengths, like random scenes from different movies, the pages of a book scattered to the wind, the sparse notes of a piece of music created by sun, metal, reflections, light.

It has interposed itself like a line of fire between the two terms that now bracket his entire life, from origins to end, from birth to death, from innocence to humanity.

The snippets that remain etched on his memory, without having any specific relation to his own existence, still illuminate the profound mystery of it. They are snippets, but they seem more complete than his whole history as a man in the Territory.

They traverse the limbic zone between the murderous light of that morning and the saturated colors of this evening irradiated by love.

They give a secret meaning to all the other secrets.

They seem able to explain the surprising actions of that very morning and his internal state at the time without ever actually evoking their occurrence.

They are the lost squadrons, the squadrons of words and concepts launched like fleets of kamikazes with no hope of returning.

They are what the men of the Territory can still do that is good, for now.

Like the Professor's retort to one of Chrysler's questions concerning the Book of the Apocalypse:

"That is why the biblical appellation of 'Beast' only works if we consider that it was very difficult at the time, even impossible, to conceive of a 'living thing' like our computers, and later the Metastructure, not to mention androids. What you call 'the Thing' doesn't really work much better, except that we can say that this paradoxically dead-thus-alive entity contains, as a process of deproduction, the Four Beasts described in the Apocalypse. The Four Beasts are the four phases of the Thing. But again, you can't consider the process from a linear point of view; the Four Beasts are *phases* of the process, which means that they divide and subdivide endlessly."

The Professor had then tried to concentrate his attention on the Scottish theologian on the basis of whose writings he and Milan Djordjevic were trying to develop a theoretical response to the challenges posed by the Thing to the Last of Humanity.

Yuri had suddenly realized, stunned by the massive blow of the revelation, that science and metaphysics could in no way be separated, ever, without both losing all reason.

The shock wave would last for days, and maybe even my whole life, he had said to himself as he listened to the Professor.

"You have to understand what men like Duns Scotus said about the 'First Principle.' They often took inspiration from the Kabbalah. For example, the fact that the Unique and Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the Creator of the World but was not created Himself, and so is not part of the Creation; this God is *metacosmic*. But being of this nature means that he gives rise to all phenomenal causes, even the first ones, and all principles, even the first ones. He is thus strangely connected to the Nothingness. Since he comes before the One, he must be considered as the zero. This, precisely this, is our most common error. And it was also the one made by the

Dominican Saxon Eckhart. Because he does not come *before* the *One*; because it is the whole, simultaneously One and Infinite, numbers that come *after the Aristotelian infinity*, contingent infinity. *It is the infinite whole of transfinite numbers*. And so it is a sort of *anti-zero*, because zero is a number that also corresponds to a whole, the empty whole that is an absolute inversion of infinity. In a way, Duns Scotus perfectly anticipated the mathematics of Cantor and Dedekind, six centuries before them.”

Later, an exegesis by Djordjevic had tried to illuminate the vast shadow areas that surrounded the infinite light of Transfiguration. Yuri had thought it resembled something like poetry.

It was *truer than nature*.

“Duns Scotus was, according to us, a worthy successor to the doctors of the classical Church, such as Basil of Caesarea and Athanasius of Alexandria, who were known for their treatises on the Holy Spirit and the Incarnation of the Word; in other words, on the mystery of the Trinity. Don’t forget, man was made in the image of God. That is important because Christ is God, and so we were made in the image of Christ. Which doesn’t mean, obviously, that we are gods, or ‘Christs.’ But we are Images—material images—that goes without saying. Which means that we are a translation of that divine nature within matter, within the Created World, with all the problems associated with that. But the image is analogical and antagonistic: the nature of Man is obviously completely distinct from that of Christ. But a principle, the principle of individuation, permits us to remain Images of the very process of Divine Creation. For Duns Scotus, this principle makes us unique beings via the relationship—singular each time—that we establish with the Multiple, *through* the Infinite. Just as in Christ, human nature and divine nature are one while remaining absolutely separate and immiscible. It is the same for the ‘individuated’ body of man. This body *is* also a soul. Note that I said *is*, not *has*. That is my Scotist predicate. The individual is infinite by nature because it is act *and* identity, and because it is thus beyond the conflict between One and Many, singular and universal, body and spirit. The soul is not a sort of ‘pilot’ contained inside some ‘intelligent’ part of the body, any more than it is everywhere while being nowhere ‘inside’ the human organism, or any more than it is beside us like a ghost or, like the monopsychists think, inside a sort of exterior

entity that thinks through us. For Scotus, who continued the work of Saint Thomas on the question of the Universals, the soul and the body in man are two infinitely intertwined principles that are really only one, while yet being completely separate. The proof is that the body dies, that the soul is reborn, and that on the Day of Judgment, souls and bodies are called to be reborn and reunited.”

“Monopsychism?” Yuri had asked.

“Yes. An old theory of an Arab Aristotelian, Averroës. In simpler terms, in the debate about nature and the process of creation of the individual, monopsychists claim that it is a ‘separate intellect,’ an autonomous psychic substance, that individuates in humans and gives them their singularity. For them, individual thought is only a particular image of the relationship instituted by this ‘intellect agent’ with consciousness. That is what Professor Zarkovsky and his team stumbled on despite my warnings. They were not responsible for it, though. The basics had been proposed more than twenty years earlier, by the first designers of the Metastructure. But its *update* was the accomplishment of the phenomenon. And its accomplishment meant its death. And its death meant its accomplishment.”

Then the Professor had picked up the thread, imperturbably.

“The entity acts at all levels of reading/writing in the World. It works in machines and human beings, and it is continuing to extend its reign of ‘hyperactive’ nihilism, except that it is also keeping it up in an ecological sense.”

“Nihilism?”

“Negation of the Created World. All the ideologies that eventually created the Pseudo-World of the Metastructure came from this denial, this ontological refusal, this impossibility of affirmation, this *bitterness*, according to the philosopher Nietzsche—whose works, Milan tells me, Link has begun reading. He was also the one who, with reason, compared nihilism to an ever-growing desert. Except that it isn’t a metaphor anymore. The American desert has already crossed the Ohio border; its front line is now thirty kilometers inside the southern part of Pennsylvania. The problem is that I say *now*, even though this desert is one of the fastest-growing geological phenomena I’ve ever heard of. When I stayed on the Ohio border waiting for Pluto’s taxi, I could see it advancing daily, but it was as we

crossed Pennsylvania that we really realized the extent of it. Entire areas that were hard ground less than a week before had been swallowed by sand. In compiling various visual data—observation of the progression of the frontal line of dunes, approximate wind speed—I concluded that this front line was advancing at the terrible speed of one kilometer per day. That is huge. It's thirty kilometers a month. Three hundred sixty a year."

And now Yuri, while he spends long moments observing the young girl in the glowing light of the setting sun bathing the glass walls of her veranda, Yuri, while he realizes, with the violence of erupting reality, the incredible, supernatural beauty of this girl, Yuri, terribly and joyously alone, realizes that this day, which has marked his life forever, this day, the last before their odyssey to the Gaspé Peninsula, this day, which began with a double murder accomplished with the naturalness of one of the territory's poisonous plants, this day of traps and plans, is ending with the unanticipated splendor of what cannot be foreseen by any plan, what can be trapped by nothing, even by itself.

He realizes, dazed by the implications of his discovery, that love is the greatest of all traps.

It is the trap that traps the traps of the world.

And it gives him a glimpse into the only area of resistance possible to the postmechanical entity, to what the Professor and Djordjevic call the Antichrist.

This, as they explained to him, should be perceived according to several perspectives.

It can rise up in a cataclysmic, global, ecological way, as the Thing has done.

It can, more simply, come alive in common human creatures, like the two men he had to kill this morning. Or like himself, maybe, at the same instant.

But an "entity," its perfect antinome, continues in spite of everything to exist, to resist, to subsist.

The Beast will have to reckon with natural prodigies like Judith Sevigny. And supernatural prodigies like Link de Nova. And it will have to reckon with simple humans, acting on motives that the Thing, the Beast, the Post-Machine, whatever you call it, undoubtedly cannot comprehend.

It could never imagine that a man like Chrysler Campbell would take such a sudden and intense interest in the durability of an academic medieval library.

It could never imagine that a simple ray of light falling on the face of a very young woman adjusting her astronomical telescope would provoke an authentic cataclysm in a consciousness that is still young, but that has just tasted the eternal oldness of death.

It could never suspect—the Beast, the Thing, the Post-Machine—that Beauty would always be able to appear as an authentic mystery, and that this mystery would always rise above it, because the very infiniteness of the Thing is this false Aristotelian infiniteness, numerical and quantitative, while what motivates Link de Nova and his paranormal gifts just as much as Judith Sevigny and her simple singular existence, is situated in this transfinite space, there where nothing can be added, there where quantitative infinity is exceeded from the outset, to cede its place to true infinity.

The Beast, of course, because of Beauty itself, will always try to couple monstrously with it; it will try to take on its traits, the unique characteristics of its being, but its maneuver is destined for failure; it can create only a ridiculous mask of the sublime, a pretty false-front of splendor. Instead of infinity, it can create only numbers.

So, the next morning, they will leave. Yuri will leave the Territory behind him; he will leave Heavy Metal Valley and Link de Nova, Junkville and the man with the red Buick, Deadlink and its masses of refugees, the necro Triads and the organ sellers, Neon Park and the two dead men in Row 299, Sheriff Wilbur Langlois and his Law of Bronze. And the glass observatory with its occupant, the stars' younger sister.

He will leave men susceptible to the Thing.

He will let the image of Judith Sevigny recede, slowly, in the rearview mirror.

26 > *DIESEL POWER*

Sainte-Anne-des-Monts.

Dawn plunges the landscape into the heart of a pink cloud. The city is appearing at the bottom of the butte where they have just stopped. The river is very wide here, in the estuary—that is, facing the ocean. The small city is a port, huddled beside the sea at the base of the Chic-Choc Mountains, the eastern counterparts of the Notre Dames. It features a true breakwater, structured around a dike and a large loading dock. There are several churches there, typical of the old Quebec from before the twenty-first century, with their silvery bells that gleam softly in the early morning light. A dozen windmills of all generations turn their helicoidal stars whose silhouettes are delicately sketched against the blue-orange background of the coming day.

No pirates control this city, and its local militia is reputed to be fairly easygoing. It is here, at the departure point, that everything can play out.

“There it is,” Campbell remarks. “We’re here.”

Yuri sends a message in plain English to the Chevrolet Silverado following two or three kilometers behind them. “Junction to Alberta. Junction to Alberta. We are in view of the goal. Repeat: we are in view of the goal.”

Then they wait calmly for the sheriff’s men to arrive.

Langlois watched over them until the very last minute, ensuring rigorous compliance with procedure. Yuri had said to himself at the time that they might be leaving HMV, but the Law of Bronze would follow them wherever they went—he also knew, though, that the sheriff wasn’t acting that way out of a simple, crazy obsession with order.

The Law of Bronze of the Territory will be their shield.

If they respect it, they have a chance. A chance to get back with the library. A chance, at least, to get back alive.

Five or ten minutes before their actual departure, the sheriff had gathered them all near the vehicles parked side by side, as if on invisible starting-blocks.

“Don’t ever communicate entirely in plain English. No proper names, no ranks, no places, no identifiers. Yuri and Campbell, you’re the ‘Junction’ group—after all, you are the ones who will be officially contacting the truck. So Junction-1 and Junction-2, individually. The tactical intervention group’s Silverado will be called ‘Alberta,’ for obvious reasons,” Langlois had said, indicating his huge deputy with a glance. “Once the connection has taken place, the truck will be ‘Convoy,’ with the same procedures, and that’s the minimum I ask of you. Also, go right to the target. Mr. Campbell, you are the titular head of the operation, but questions of security will be primarily decided by Slade Vernier. Let me be clear about this—as long as everything is going well, Mr. Campbell, you’re in charge. If any threat arises or you’re under fire, the tactical team takes over. Obviously, this is not negotiable.”

“With ten minutes to departure, Sheriff,” Campbell had said. “I don’t think I’m in any position to argue.”

The truck is waiting for them at the predetermined place. A bit to the east of the city, on a secondary street. The meeting has been planned for the early morning, before the city really wakes up.

And sure enough, the truck is there. At the appointed time. Orbital rendezvous 100 percent normal.

Yuri sees it as they round a bend, parked on the side of the road. A typical European truck, with its flat hood wedged vertically just under the wide windshield, the engine in the rear under the cab. Military green. He notes the arms of the Lombard army, a few examples of which he has seen printed on old duffle coats in the Djordjevic home and on Link de Nova’s shoulders, as well as a small gold-and-silver heraldic plaque he doesn’t recognize in the very center of the radiator grille.

The region is wooded, its flora nourished by the oceanic humidity, which creates a dense curtain hiding them perfectly from the city and the coastal road. Webs of purplish fog drift among the tree-covered buttes all the way to the banks of the estuary. An immense sparkling-blue mass, touched with

quicksilver sparks, extends far beyond the horizon, more than a hundred kilometers wide. This river is a piece of the ocean.

Chrysler's plan is working perfectly, thinks Yuri.

There it is; the "junction" worked. They are meeting the library from Rome and the men who brought it here.

Soldier-monks, Djordjevic had explained succinctly.

Soldier-monks.

Soldiers?

Monks?

He remembers Campbell's intuition, his own questions. His acts, his thoughts, his nonthoughts. He remembers why they have come here. Them, and no one else.

If it took soldiers, soldier-monks, to escort this library, it is not only because the books are worth a lot—commercially or otherwise.

It is because they are an army in themselves.

Soldier-monks.

Two men. Fortyish. Dressed in black uniforms, long as dusters, with heavy hoods.

Soldier-monks. Shaved heads. State-of-the-art binoculars hanging from cords around their necks. On their shoulders, the same gold-and-silver emblem as the one on the truck's grille. *They work directly for the Papacy; that's all I can tell you because it's all I know*, Djordjevic had said.

They stand face-to-face. The four men from the Territory and the two from the Vatican. Two worlds. Two worlds in full-on collision.

Above them, high-altitude clouds, light and quick like celestial racehorses, shingle the azure sky. The sun is pale yellow. Nature is waking; birds shake the treetops with an endless, ever-changing cacophony. The fog retreats slowly, in cottony wisps mingling with the clouds, sea spray, the Nordic wind. Blue-green lichen dangles from the branches of the maple trees and ancient surviving firs.

This universe is still beautiful.

Soldier-monks.

The library.

The Convoy.

We, the Escort.

We, the Secret Human Army.

This new morning, as sublime as yesterday's, and that of the day before.

This universe that stubbornly remains so beautiful in the midst of disaster.

Organization: Follow the commandments of the Law of Bronze and the sheriff's orders to the letter. Yuri and Campbell, "Junction," drive two or three kilometers ahead of the convoy, as the advance men. Slade Vernier and Lecerf-le-Français, "Alberta," are behind the truck for rear protection. In "Convoy," the soldier-monks relieve each other at the wheel every four hours, with the passenger serving as copilot and especially as possible firer of 5.56-caliber NATO ammunition.

Introductions: Quickly dispensed with. Indication of names and functions. Rapid briefing on the situation. Exchange of certain vital information, the opening of a dialogue:

"Our real identities are secret. My name is Francisco Alpini, because I was a member of the Alpini division, the Italian mountain troops. We learned to march, ski, kill. To kill while marching, kill while skiing. To ski while marching."

They realize that Brother "Francisco," like all the members of his secret Order, lives constantly under various pseudonyms. Anonymity, the manipulation of information, ruses, and worse can be extremely efficient forms of combat against the Devil, the Papacy has admitted. Especially in these troubled times when He knows so well how to present Himself in guises of honesty, loyalty, frankness, friendship, and peace. It is the visible paradox of the Mission of these soldier-monks whose very names are known only to the Most Holy Pontiff and the High Council of the Order: they must remain totally secret within their very community; they must use trickery against their own co-religionists. *To remain invisible to the eyes of the Devil*, it is said in the secret Order, *we must remain invisible to the eyes of the Church itself*.

"The Holy Pontiff is aware of the dangers he himself faces: the Scriptures are very clear on this subject. The Devil would know how to lie in every possible way, especially by taking on the very face of the Savior, and thus his Temporal Body, the Church itself. 'There is nothing to say he might not take my own place one day,' he has said to us."

“It hasn’t taken the Pope’s place, but it has taken possession of the world,” answers Yuri without really knowing why, obeying an impulse that comes from the deepest part of his soul.

The man accompanying Brother Francisco Alpini on this odyssey is one Brother Friedrich Ostermann. *This guy’s been places*, thinks Yuri, observing his suntanned skin, the deep lines etched in his face by tragedy, the eyes tempered in a still-blazing forge. The secret Order knows how to choose its members. Yuri senses a powerful empathy between the two men, of the kind that rises between brothers in arms, well before the first problem, the first battle, the first killing. *They look out for each other, because each one knows the other is looking out for him. Basic doctrine of the Alpinis*, muses Yuri, as of all the elite corps that have existed for as long as there have been wars, as long as the world has not been able to impose a Pax Universalis using an instrument like the Metamachine, omniscient and invisible. Now, with the Metamachine vanished, the few regional conflicts born of the Grand Jihad have ceded their places to the multiplication of neotribal wars, microlocal wars, wars from before the existence of nations, religions, politics. Which is exactly what is happening here, in the American northeast.

Today, thinks Yuri, is their first day in New Jerusalem, not yet born but already threatened.

“Our organization is legally clandestine, even in the eyes of ecclesiastical institutions. Our Order as such has been decreed *in pectore*. We are the secret service of the Papacy. We answer to no one but the sovereign Pontiff.”

Then:

“Our Order has transmitter-receivers in working order; we are able to communicate with our Superior Fathers, or with Opus Dei in the Vatican. This library just crossed the Atlantic during the worst part of the winter; now it will have to pass through a new terra incognita of which we know almost nothing, but we do know that this cargo is not only vitally important for its intended recipients—meaning yourselves—but that it is at high risk of attracting lusts of all sorts. We were warned that acts of maritime piracy

would be standard during the crossing, but now that we are on land we really have no idea what is in store for us.”

“Where we’re going,” Vernier replies simply, “the acts of piracy you refer to are child’s play. Welcome to America.”

Alpini takes the opportunity to emphasize the situation on the other side of the ocean. “In Italy, the neo-Islamist offensive has begun again in the northwest. They’ve launched a huge operation against Genoa, and people say powerful naval forces are massing in the Balkans to retake Trieste and attack Venice again. This time, the Lombard army might not be enough. Naples hasn’t yet fallen in the south, but Puglia and almost all of Calabria did in just a few weeks ... not to mention Sicily, which is now their sanctuary, just as it was centuries ago.”

“Do you really think the Holy City is in danger?” Yuri asks.

“Yes. We all think so. It is the most redoubtable warning in the Scriptures, the Mystery of the Holy Iniquity: during the End Times, the Church itself will be crucified. We just barely escaped the catacombs. Obviously, this mission *has to* be a success.”

“Heavy Metal Valley County will dedicate all its resources to it, I assure you.”

The Law of Bronze is with them, Yuri thinks. It will be the armor that protects the convoy and its contents. It will be the deadly steel in the service of these books from another world.

Control: Observation of the truck. Thirty-eight tons, militarized Iveco, with seven-millimeter Kevlar armor on its vital parts—engine, lateral walls and rear door of the container carrier, cab doors. Assault-infantry model uncrushable tires. Securimax Plexiglas windshield. Container carrier solidly riveted to the platform; khaki base with green-brown-black camouflage paint. Inside: Two levels, separated by a horizontal aluminum wall. A main level that contains four rectangular containers lacquered with ultramarine paint, with the insignia of the Italian Aeronautica. Second level, narrow, less tall: other containers, smaller, green in color, marked “Evergreen,” boxes of steel-gray metal with a black cross imprinted on each side; jerricans, spare tires, suitcases, and duffel bags crammed with various objects. The library is distributed among the main containers on level one. The rest, above it, explains one of the Vatican men, are personal effects,

necessities, gasoline reserves, ammunition, tools, mechanical parts, and a second complete, dismantled engine, as well as around twelve hundred Jerusalem Bibles, which weren't planned to be included at the outset, but which Opus Dei insisted on adding at the last minute.

Planning: The group is organized, given the main axes of the route to be followed and a rapid description of the Ameri-Canadian Northeast. Warned of the principal risks. The final goal is stated. A map is taken out, and passage points and access routes indicated.

Strategy: They will pass through the Notre Dame Mountains; they will not go back down by the coastal road. They will avoid all the seaboard cities—Sainte-Anne-des-Monts, to begin with, but also Matane, Rimouski, Rivière-du-Loup, and Quebec, obviously. They will be driving at around a thousand meters above sea level; it will be mountainous, desolate; the roads have not been maintained for at least twelve years.

It will be very tough.

Chrysler never allows the slightest illusory hope to remain.

That, he always says, gives reality a bit of a chance.

And the reality is this.

The Notre Dame Mountains, on the border between Maine and New Brunswick. Around nine hundred meters high on average. But they stretch for more than four hundred kilometers.

Tall, rocky peaks intercut by wooded valleys, vast expanses of marshland, peat bogs covered with fuzzy reeds, sand pits; vast wildlands studded with the vermilion tints of *Cornus canadensis*, the royal blue—purple of *viperina*, the rusty brown of chaparral bushes, blue-green toothed leaves surrounding the violet blossoms of thistles, the pointillist sparkles of orange hawkweed and the gold brilliance of broom in yellow clumps, thick and compact. And dozens of lakes. Like the one whose shore they are hugging right now.

The vegetation is strange here, born of the climatic disruptions that have been happening since the beginning of the century. Pines, cypresses, acacias, cedars, olive trees—typical of Mediterranean flora—intermingle with more lush subtropical species, succulents, cacti, banana and palm trees, clumps of Nordic dwarf pines, stands of firs, groves of maples, birches, red and white lodgepoles, clusters of beeches, profusions of green

oaks, and sudden stretches of arid tundra, drier than the semidesert steppes they will also be crossing at times. The whole forms a sort of western-hybrid landscape, a kind of dreamlike Colorado that has been magically created by the combining of the deserts of middle America and Canada, the Arctic blizzards, and the storms driven in from the North Atlantic.

Beauty refuses to give up, thinks Yuri.

The truck has difficulty navigating the deeply rutted roads. The military turbodiesel has to use all its horsepower to bring the cab across the pits, while dealing with the added nuisance of thick pools of mud. The main road leading to Lake Témiscouata and Cabano is blocked for hundreds of meters by a long series of landslides. They have no choice but to avoid Route 232 and go through the countryside. Through the desolate mountain landscape. They will probably not be able to cross La Trinité-des-Monts on time, much less Saint-Esprit.

The glacial waters of Lake Ferré, whose southern shore they are following, glitter like silver under the sky, which is deepening to twilight indigo. The crenellated peaks of the Notre Dame Mountains are hit full on by the last golden rays of the sun, while the surrounding land is shadowed slate blue. It is all breathtakingly beautiful.

Yuri does some rapid mental calculations. With their capabilities under “normal” conditions, it will take them around two hours to travel the next ten kilometers—if everything goes well.

They won’t come into view of the huge Lake Témiscouata before nightfall.

Chrysler would never take the risk of driving with headlights so close to the Maine–New Brunswick border. He will order the convoy to stop, wherever it might be at the time.

They are barely a third of the way through their mountain crossing. They are losing time. Far too much time. The time might end by losing them.

Chrysler’s plan received general approval. It was simple, and promised to be efficient as well.

“We’ll take the same route going, or nearly the same, as coming, according to local conditions. We’ll test it and make note of the problems we come up against. That should make the work easier.”

It was a good plan, a very good plan, like all Chrysler’s plans.

There's only one problem: now, during the return trip, they have thirty-eight tons and five meters more of chassis to deal with. The plan didn't really take this detail, essential as it is, into consideration.

Lake Ferré sparkles like a bowl of watery stars, a galaxy of crystals drowning in a cloud of liquid gold. The sky is filled with straggling clouds flying in all directions, capturing the many frequencies that irradiate the high atmosphere. The mountains look like blocks of diamond waiting in the darkness for a thousand-year-old trap. Beauty is still resisting, thinks Yuri. Nothing is lost.

At dawn the following day they take to the road as rapidly as possible, and the morning is still pale in the sky as they follow the shores of the Lac des Aigles, whose turquoise waters ripple gently in a fresh breeze from the north. From the peak of one of the high buttes that overlooks the lake, Yuri can see the four-winged shapes of a few abandoned windmills that now turn only at the whim of the winds. The continuous movement of their blades gracefully brushes the light azure of the sky. Lower down, in the valley, he can see the spidery architecture of the old high-tension lines of Hydro-Québec, giant pylons in constructivist totems, taut cables still crossing space but transmitting nothing. Technology, it seems, is incapable of displaying its intrinsic beauty except at the moment of its extinction.

Beauty is following them, Yuri thinks, because the Law of Bronze is with them.

They are still in the region located within the confines of Maine, Quebec, and New Brunswick; everyone is on maximum alert. Later—early in the afternoon, if all goes well—when they cross Lake Témiscouata and Notre-Dame-du-Lac to rejoin Rivière-Bleue and Route 289, it will be even worse. And even more dangerous, especially on 289. They tested the route on the trip out. No problems then, but on this road that follows along the Maine border at a few miles' distance, in the county of Aroos-took, there are numerous, fiercely determined bands of highwaymen. *If we run into a code red during the trip*, Chrysler has said, *it will be then*.

For Campbell, this means that they will be crossing a war zone. They will shoot on sight without notice. They will take no prisoners and crush anything that moves.

It is an ethic that has proven itself. It is the ethic of the Territory.

He, too, will shoot on sight, without notice, and he will crush everything in his path, and anyone who tries to bar their path.

The library will get through. The library will reach safe harbor in Grand Junction.

The library is protected.

They have a shield. The shield of the Law of Bronze. The Law that knows no borders, no jurisdiction. The Law that applies everywhere, to everyone, with the same strictness.

God created men, and Samuel Colt made them equal, goes an old saying from the American West.

Route 289. There it is. They have passed Lake Témiscouata, then Cabano and Notre-Dame-du-Lac, practically deserted. Now they are driving as fast as they can through the American county of Aroostook. The mountains dominate the wide river that already, here at Rivière-du-Loup, is turning into an estuary that will become a gulf farther on. The sun has begun its daily journey toward the horizon, and the way is no worse going than it was coming, though the truck cannot go any faster than forty kilometers an hour. The speed of a column is that of its slowest member, an ancient military rule that Chrysler Campbell knows perfectly.

They must at all costs get away from here before nightfall; they must get as far away from Maine as they can; they must follow Route 289—patiently, but quickly. They must gain every possible second under the permanent pressure of a calculated risk. Eyes glued to his binoculars, Yuri must not miss a thing. They are the advance men; nothing can escape them.

They must get through.

Route 289 runs along the Maine border for approximately twenty miles, then swerves toward the river.

That is where it becomes complicated, especially with the truck. First they have to go down to Lake Pohenegamook, and then turn full south toward the Quebecois county of Kamouraska to Route 287 and then the two state highways in decent condition that succeed it, RD 109 and RD 209. Then they will arrive in the Estrie via the Bois-Francs, toward Thetford Mines, Asbestos County, and straight toward the region east of Sherbrooke,

between Magog and Lac-Brome, before heading south of Cowansville and reaching Lake Champlain.

That is the plan. It was tested successfully on the way.

Chrysler is very specific: all that means is that the plan worked on the way, and that it has a chance of working on the way back. It is in no way a sure thing.

They stop to refuel near a small, deserted town called Saint-Athanasius. They follow a row that will take them to another row, and then to 287.

They are putting some distance between themselves and Maine. Slowly but surely. With his usual strictness, Chrysler reformulates his orders: no coastal roads, ever. Road gangs, river thieves, highways and intercity expressways without exits—better to risk the mountain expedition at the American border. None of them believes the convoy to be in any real danger here; thieves from Maine and New Brunswick are looking elsewhere, toward Quebec or Montreal.

“You think they might declare war?” Yuri asks, innocently.

Campbell gives his frank, deep laugh, one that chills the blood under the present circumstances. “Of course they’ll declare war; that’s all they know how to do. That’s all they’re good for. ‘War,’ though—I should really say tribal infighting, strictly animalistic, no internal solidarity, no trust in anyone, ever ... compared to that, the Territory is paradise.”

“Think we’ll make 287 before tonight?”

“The roads are in pretty iffy condition, as you’ve seen. I’m no weather forecaster. It’ll depend on the truck. And the two guys driving it.”

They reach Route 287 just as the sun sets behind the mountains. They can’t risk turning on the headlights. Chrysler orders the convoy to park immediately on the side of the road. They followed the plan, and they’ve come out all right.

They still have to spend one more night hidden behind the trees on the side of the road; then, tomorrow, during the day, they will leave the mountains behind, arrive quickly in the Estrie, and then be in sight of the Territory.

They followed the plan, and the plan followed them.

The noise of the Italian truck is metallic, clear, bright; it doesn’t have the deep heaviness of North American engines. A coloratura soprano against a

baritone in a Wagnerian choir. Yuri realizes that the difference between two civilizations can be found in the nuances of sound between two machines more than in the customs of their people or the style of their architecture.

The convoy is on the road again; dawn has just broken. Beauty is already showing her face, too, wreathed with a blue-white halo. The highest peaks of the Notre Dame Mountains are pale yellow, glazed with the translucence that signals the arrival of the sun. Yuri spends a few moments contemplating the progressive play of the waking light on nature before raising his combat binoculars to his eyes, amplified vision, multi-frequency treatment, laser telemetry—equipped, “intelligent” selection and acquisition of targets, multifocalization on targetable points, numeric coding of information. The world is no longer beautiful or bestial; it is parametered, calculated, truer than nature.

They drive RD 109 and then 209, which are directly connected to each other; they are halfway through the mountains, in the Chaudière-Appalaches region, skirting glacial lakes that shine like mirrors under the blinding light of the new-risen sun. The high peaks, covered with the multiclimatic mixture of American flora, gleam with silvery light.

They drive. The convoy is in good order. Yuri and Campbell are three kilometers in the lead; the road is in good shape. They will be able to make up part of the lost time.

Yuri observes the nature around them, binoculars riveted to his eyes like prostheses newly but permanently attached to his body.

They drive, sometimes at up to eighty kilometers an hour, the best speed they have made since their departure from Sainte-Anne-des-Monts.

Yuri contacts the two other vehicles regularly to make sure everything is okay.

Everything is okay.

They drive. They leave the county of Kamouraska and enter that of L’Islet, rounding the point of Lake Saint-Anne. In twenty miles or so, state road 209 will connect to the larger Route 216, and they will undoubtedly be able to go even faster.

They drive. Every minute puts the Maine border farther behind them.

Chrysler’s plan has worked perfectly.

They drive. The morning light plays on the various plant and mineral textures that mark the changing landscape.

They drive. The engine growls deeply, continuously.

They drive. The world is staggeringly beautiful.

They drive. And suddenly, Yuri screams in the cabin:

“STOP!”

They stop. Cleanly, at the edge of a wooded area opening onto a vast plateau grooved with ravines and scattered with heavy blocks of stone.

And everywhere on the plateau, their backs to the convoy, walking toward the river, are hundreds of men. Men in urban-camouflage uniforms of gray and black. Armed to the teeth. And with them are various civil and military vehicles.

The rear line must be three hundred meters away.

Hundreds of men. Maybe more than a thousand.

Yuri barely takes the time to confirm what his binoculars are telling him before ordering Chrysler to back off—“Good God, faster”—into the shelter of the woods from which they have just emerged. He seizes the radio microphone. The language of the Territory takes control of his brain, it is a state of absolute emergency. “Code red. Total stop. Vehicles under cover immediately.”

“Who are these guys?” Chrysler demands.

Yuri jumps out of the pickup and walks through the underbrush toward the clearing. From behind a bare, ancient maple he observes the crowd of men through his binoculars. Campbell sees him run back toward the truck at top speed.

“They saw the truck coming. They’re turning back toward the road!”

Chrysler doesn’t hesitate for a second. The roar of the engine makes the air shiver like thunder above the streets where the last men are fighting. Yuri hears himself screaming into the radio in the language of the Territory, the language of militarized zones exploding from his throat: “Junction to all units; code red. Maximum speed. I repeat: code red, maximum speed.”

“Canadian unionists,” he says as they drive at almost a hundred kilometers per hour along the side of the plateau where dozens of men are running in their direction, shouldering their firearms, while several all-terrain vehicles execute half-turns with difficulty amid the ravines and boulders.

The light is dazzling in the windshield. The sky is a pure, electric azure blue. The men running after them are like a parade. Even when plans aren’t working as expected, the world is still inalterably beautiful.

Yuri watches the rear guard of the army of men turn toward them en masse. Red-and-white Canadian flags flutter like pennants from the combat vehicles' antennae. The light glares in the windshield; the morning is pale yellow like an awakening; the morning is pale blue like the mountains; the morning is the color of a steel bayonet attached to a sawed-off rifle.

Surprise, and the speed of their movements, are obviously on their side. Bullets of various calibers explode around them, some of them lodging in a compact block in the rear door of the pickup. An RPG-7 rocket snakes past them through the air, leaving a tail of white smoke in its wake, but it explodes farther down, on the other side of the road. Behind them, the truck and the sheriff's Silverado are taking their share of fire, but soon Yuri can see in the rearview mirror the enormous mass nearing them like an avalanche of steel, the yellow-and-white papal standard glittering like a gold-and-silver sun; he can hear the metallic noise of the turbo inflating the compressed air of the military diesel pipes. The world continues to produce sublime accidents, unexpected colors, unplanned sounds. Beauty will not give way.

On the radio, Yuri hears confirmation that no serious damage has been done; they have stopped the unionists in their tracks without giving them time to react in a coordinated manner. The pickup bounces on the road; at each pothole, each rut, each crack, each upward or downward slope, Yuri has the impression that they are not driving on broken asphalt but rather flying low above it, like a plane taking off.

"We've got to put as much distance as possible between them and us, as fast as we can. Soon we'll get to 216, which will be almost the end of the mountains," Chrysler says.

Yuri doesn't reply.

Chrysler's plan is still working, even if pushed to the extreme limit.

The Law of Bronze is with them, Yuri thinks. It will protect the convoy.

And the plan will proceed.

"The best plan," says Chrysler, "is the one you didn't think of. The one that makes you think."

Of course, sometimes you have to think very, very fast.

27 > *MAGIC BUS*

Yuri looks at Chrysler, and sees unwavering determination in his face.

No. They won't budge. The sun is already beginning its descent toward the horizon; they are way behind schedule. But that isn't the sort of argument that will impress Campbell.

They have been waiting for more than an hour in the shelter of the dense woods. They will wait another hour if they have to. Campbell doesn't even have to open his mouth for Yuri to know that.

Zero risk. Maximum security. Follow the plan.

Nothing else.

They had just reached the 216 when Yuri had called for another emergency stop to the convoy. On the hills to the west, in the direction of the river, was another squadron of men in movement. They had seemed to be picking up camp to move to another, unknown destination.

This time they were protected by a long curtain of vegetation—chaparral, dwarf pines, yellow lodgepoles, green pines, and umbrella trees—and by the fact that the small army was busy among the hills in two or three parallel ranks, as well as the kilometer's distance between them. But vast gaps of space kept them from any further movement, for fear of repeating the experience of less than two hours before.

"We won't move," Campbell had said. And Slade Vernier had agreed with him 100 percent.

Yuri notes the desert-camouflage uniforms of the men, the blue flag emblems with white crosses, the fleur-de-lis.

"Quebecois separatists. They seem to be moving northwest. Maybe to catch the unionists from behind, on their southern flank. Are they heading to the Plains of Abraham from the other side of the river?"

"I told you they were at war. All of them. Everyone against everyone."

For Chrysler, this is good news. In a few hours, the two largest armed groups in the region will be slitting each other's throats—and the convoy

will be a hundred kilometers farther south.

They will wait. Wait for the separatist army to traverse the hills.

The plan seems perfectly suited to the serenity of the place, the Notre Dame Mountains overlooking the landscape, indifferent to the ephemeral humans dithering about in it.

Beauty cares nothing for the Beast.

Later they are forced to leave Route 216, cut off by recent landslides that have happened since the trip out. This wasn't on the map. But the plan makes up for the insufficiency of maps. They will take the 277, and then the 276, going through Les Etchemins County. That will bring them a little closer to the Maine border again, but Campbell wants to be out of the mountains before night.

So, there is no other choice. No other choice but to follow the plan. No other choice but to let themselves soak up all the dangerous beauty this world still possesses.

This world peopled with men who spend their time making war.

Everyone against everyone.

The 276 is also blocked, and in a way that suggests a violent bombardment; even the high-tension wires have been sabotaged; the pylons that follow the crest are nothing but piles of rubble. Armies farther north must have been fighting here even as we were arriving at Sainte-Anne-des-Monts, thinks Yuri, knowing that his companion is coming to the same conclusion.

Their unofficial telepathy. Their "junction." Their mutual training. The Law of the Territory, of which they are, just as much as the sheriff's men, designated representatives.

We're just private contractors, bounty hunters. And our job is to escort twelve thousand books across eastern Quebec. And no one has any reason to try to stop us. Not even nature. Not even the World.

No one.

The plan is there to make up for bad luck. The Law of Bronze is there so the plan will be followed to the letter. The Law is above both Beauty and the Beast—or, more exactly, on an oblique line that connects them, in a way. It is there so that the Territory's work can be accomplished, this Law from a world where it is undoubtedly maintained with implacable rigor.

They will have to make a long detour by Sainte-Rose-de-Watford and Route 204, coming close again to the American county of Aroostook, before they can go back down via 275 toward the main road. Orange alert. Everyone on their guard. The sun continues to descend; the shadows lengthen. The blue of the sky deepens to cobalt. The earth and even the air are full of golden spangles.

The plan is working, thinks Yuri, but we are losing time again. A lot of time.

They are on the 112, near Asbestos County, on the Thetford Mines road. They have just passed a small, semideserted town called Tring Junction. The sun is sinking toward the horizon, shining infrared, endowing the sky with a brilliant layer of acrylic fire.

Tring Junction. It is like a funny homonymic reminder, a geographical blink, a little joke on the map. It is a sign that they have succeeded. A sign that they chose the right path. A sign that the plan worked.

A sign that the library is in good hands. Because even the names are with them. Even the accidents. Even the problems. Even nature. Even the bombardments.

Yuri rummages in the glove compartment and pulls out an antique cassette by The Who. It is a relic that belonged to Campbell's father. The tape *Made in the Twentieth Century*.

"Magic Bus" fills the cabin, and Yuri surprises himself by singing the chorus softly. *Too much, magic bus ...*

Campbell glances at Yuri. His smile is wide, frank, radiant.

Yes, they have succeeded. They have just entered L'Amiante County, so named for the huge beds of asbestos that the Canadians strip-mined for a century and a half. They can see the vast gray-green circles tracing their giant curves in the very heart of the earth; in the fading light of evening they look like steel tombs for some yet-unknown metal.

They have come through the Notre Dame Mountains, their biggest obstacle. Soon they will arrive in the Estrie. The worst part is behind them. To the right, the west, toward the river, where the sun will disappear at any moment, expanses of woods stretch in compact bunches in the midst of a landscape of rocks and piney brush. To the left, the east, the sky is dark, flooding with slate-blue light a vast plateau of schistose rocks studding gray earth that has taken on the color of chrome in the twilight.

They have come across four hundred and fifty kilometers of mountains and escaped two armies of a good thousand men each. The library is in good hands. The library is protected by the shield of the Territory, the shield of the Law of Bronze.

And the only men who can ensure that it is respected.

Everywhere. For everyone. And every one.

Without the slightest exception.

It is at that very moment that bullets star the windshield and the driver's-side window.

One of the physical phenomena most directly affected by this type of situation, meaning the critical moment of the explosion of hostilities, is time itself.

Everything goes faster, much faster, much too fast, and yet it is this very speed that causes the reverse particularity: the general slowing, the rhythmic discrepancy, the elastic time span between seconds, the inverted periods, the freezing of events in a sort of filmic memorial bath in "real time."

And if time is affected according to the intangible rules of Einstein's physics, then space is affected just as much. Distances, perspectives, volumes, light, colors, textures. Everything.

Which is exactly what is happening now.

First movement: impacts on the cab, stars of crystal on the windshield, the reddening light of sunset. Everything turns into a pinkish plasma that fills the truck.

Second movement: sudden stop of the vehicle, perfectly controlled downshift, strident shriek of tires on asphalt, Chrysler's voice—"We're being attacked!"—Yuri's voice into the radio—"Attack, code red; I repeat, code red."—and the lurching of the world in the phosphorescent green of the combat binoculars.

Third movement: rat-a-tat-tat! Sustained percussion of automatic gunfire, new impacts, a tire flattens with a sucking noise.

Fourth movement: understand what is happening, see what is happening and where it is coming from. Understanding a threat is half of reacting to it.

Fifth movement: need to act fast. Scope out the target. A dozen men, on foot, hidden behind a line of rocks on their left, to the east, above the road,

lined up like acrobats on a high wire; the rocks are almost square, their sides covered with brownish moss.

Sixth movement: operative technique. The laser telemeter shows the distance—three hundred twenty meters. Multifrequency sensors detect all sources of radiation. The dozen men, perfectly identified as living organisms with details of the materials they are carrying, are screened with the infrared, neutrino tomography, mass spectrography, radar waves, other kinds of radiation. They can even be seen behind centimeters of rock, wood, metal. Nothing escapes the electronic eye.

Then: a long sequence of events at high speed, barely punctuated by a few pauses, as everything unfolds with the fluidity of a scientific documentary filming a growing plant in slow motion inside a Mason jar.

First the plan, the Law of Bronze in action, organize their defenses. They have to regroup. Chrysler decides to attempt a half-turn and go back toward the convoy, but Yuri stops him—“NO! Why?! What the”—and shows him why: the truck and the Silverado have already stopped a good kilometer behind them, at the top of the long rise they had just finished descending when the fire erupted. “AND?” And look, up there, the road winds around a tall butte. “AND?” shouts Campbell, resuming his maneuver. And these ten or twelve guys are just a diversion, three hundred fifty meters, with old assault rifles; all they could do was flatten a tire! They’re just there to bar our way, to make us act like they want us to. “AND HOW THE FUCK DO THEY WANT US TO ACT?” They want us to make a half-turn up to the top of the rise; they want the convoy to park in a defensive position, so the larger part of their force can trap us as we pass the tall butte. Numeric superiority, land advantage, surprise and proximity of attack.

Chrysler thinks fast, understands fast, acts fast.

The plan. The Law of Bronze.

War isn’t won by weapons; it is won by the men who wield those weapons.

But there are no pauses in war. Acting fast is necessary, but not always sufficient.

Yuri shouts into the microphone, ordering the two other vehicles to rejoin them as fast as possible at the bottom of the rise. Fast. Very fast. As fast as possible. RED ALERT.

“What’s happening?” demands Chrysler, calmly opening the locker under the pickup’s backseat.

“They’re coming from everywhere. Incredible. Fuck! It isn’t possible.”

“What isn’t possible?” asks Chrysler, taking out his automatic AK-101 rifle and the Ruger Mini-14, which he hands to Yuri.

“You won’t believe it.”

The firing resumes; a few more bullets hit the windshield, and one of them causes the right rear window to explode; shards of frosted glass fly past the electronic binoculars, leaving a translucent trail in air saturated with liquid silver.

“We’ve got to get out,” Campbell says. “We’ll hide behind the pickup until the convoy gets here.”

It isn’t long after they scramble out of the pickup that the convoy pulls into sight, less than two hundred meters away. Italian-made turbo-diesel engines aren’t lacking in horsepower.

Chrysler, stunned by what he has just seen up there at the top of the rise they came from, doesn’t ask Yuri any more questions. Above them the first stars are appearing in an electric ultramarine sky. So the night will be their domain.

The dozen men downhill on the rocky ridge are changing positions, replaced by a lighter squad, and suddenly everything becomes clear. Who. Why. How. From where.

Horsemen.

Horses! Mounted men, firing at them with various types of military and hunting rifles and a great deal of ferocity.

And the men high up on the butte, even more numerous, and who only Yuri’s presence of mind detected; these men are also armed in a varied fashion, typical of hired soldiers acting as an advance guard for heavier, more structured units, but also independently.

Their uniforms. The long brown or gray tunics, motley military uniforms, square bits of cloth in black and white or green and white knotted around their necks and resting on their shoulders ...

The horses. And these ... *animals*.

The truck roars to a stop just in front of the pickup, creating a huge shield of metal and Kevlar for it—though one now pocked with several bullet holes. The Silverado follows suit, parking at an angle behind the Iveco, blocking the road while remaining relatively protected by the imposing mass of the truck. Their view of the butte, located a little more than a

thousand meters away, is partially obstructed by the vehicles, but what Chrysler has already seen is more than enough to dumbfound him.

He turns an incredulous face toward Yuri, as pale as if he has seen a ghost.

“No, you aren’t dreaming,” Yuri assures him, readying the Mini-14’s twenty-round cartridge clip. “They are neo-Islamists. And those are camels.”

Yuri was the first to notice the horses, and then the desert animals. It was only in the midst of battle, of killing, that he became fully aware of the wholly unexpected creatures. And after the combat he would discover another sort of typology of living beings that none of them could have foreseen.

Every plan, even the best, meets its limits at some point—limits that are often imposed by the most secret parts of the enemy’s plan.

Their metal fortress newly formed on the road, there is a brief discussion between Campbell and Slade Vernier, who now takes charge of the operation. Campbell raises no objection; it is the Law of Bronze.

The Islamists have come from the east, from Maine, Aroostook County, probably. The convoy is deployed in a double-L formation, the truck as the principal line, sheltering the two pickups, parked perpendicularly across the road. The fortress has only one flaw: it leaves the western mountains open, with the long stretch of woods, Nordic dwarf pines and lodgepoles, cedars, firs, and high, wide tree ferns and subtropical acacias, intercut in every sense by crevassed tracks and deep ravines—difficult to navigate for motor vehicles, but much easier for horses or camels.

Superior technology, Yuri realizes, can become a serious handicap if it isn’t backed up by a strategy adapted to the situation.

The day is ending; night vision might be our only advantage.

He doesn’t know Slade Orange Vernier very well. He hopes the man will measure up.

He hopes he will be able to get them out of this, like Campbell would probably know how to do.

He hopes he will help them kill a lot of men.

Yuri happens to notice that “Magic Bus” is still playing on a continuous loop on Chrysler’s cassette player; one of Link de Nova’s small digital devices allows the pickup’s deck to adapt to all existing types of media—so Yuri put the Who song on repeat, like with a CD. All they have to do is wait for the tape to rewind.

And the riff begins again, imperturbable. *Too much, magic bus ...*

Beauty does not care about ugliness; they are not even of the same world. They can never even cross paths.

Acceleration, turbodiesel style: the truck plows forward amid gunfire and explosions of all sorts, as well as the din of steel battered by impact, Securimax windows that absorb a hail of bullets with a dull thud, and the shattering of more fragile window glass, white sunbursts trapped in the green-gold of the binocular sights.

The situation has changed very fast; time seems dislocated, the unity of space fractured. He is in more than one place at once. He is there, elsewhere, before, after, during. He is under the stars, he is under fire, he is in the night. *Too much, magic bus ...*

They are arsenals on four legs. He, in addition to the Ruger Mini-14, is carrying a large German-made H&K MP5 rapid-fire pistol with a nine-millimeter cartridge in a Mohawk quiver on his back. It is a weapon of great precision, even though it was originally designed for short-range fire. He also has his nine-millimeter Sig Sauer automatic in a police strap under his arm; the Russian Tokarev is in a fringed, cowboy-style black leather holster attached to his belt. Two old French-made fragmenting grenades are tucked into the ventral pockets of his combat harness; two other, more modern Chinese-made ones, kept on his dorsal side, are “flash mixes” at once deafening, immobilizing, and blinding. The Mossberg 590 slide-action shotgun is lying on the pickup’s backseat ready for use; alongside it is a long Gurkha sword with a curved blade, his wild-card weapon, his final recourse. *Too much, magic bus ...*

Campbell is armed with his AK-101 assault rifle, a Remington patrol rifle semiautomatic, a Winchester SX3 rifle, his SS Luger, a Marine assault knife, and the .38 Magnum revolver that Yuri took off the corpse of the man in red on Row 299.

Yuri has already been sucked into the vortex of the night, the night of weapons, the night of multitraumatic injuries. The enemy has several powerful cross-country motorcycles similar to his Kawasaki and a duo of

sidecars where the passenger serves as machine gunner. Horses, camels, gasoline-fueled motorcycles. The present is nothing but the mutual destruction of past and future.

He is there, he is firing, he is here and screaming something indistinct to Chrysler; he is farther away, behind the truck, exchanging tactical advice with Brother Francisco; now he is supporting Brother Friedrich, who is firing at a group of horsemen galloping down the butte. He is near the pickup again, and in concert with Campbell he empties twenty rounds from a fresh cartridge continuously on a group of camel riders and motorcyclists who are attempting a southern charge around sixty meters from them at the bottom of the slope. *Too much, magic bus!*

He is farther away, firing nasty double-ought buckshot from the Mossberg at several camel riders shooting at them from the bottom of the butte, to the north. Stars. Fire. The night. Black.

Too much, magic bus!

He is there now, near the Silverado, reloading his Mini-14 and backing up the young French sharpshooter, who, like a machine with a faint smile, is methodically firing his SR25M telescopic rifle—a weapon used by the Navy Seals under the code name MK11, if Yuri remembers correctly. The man and his gun seem to form a single, perfect killing machine. Winchester .308 hunter's bullets. Twenty-cartridge magazines. A titanium bipode. Precision down to the millimeter. A Leupold optics system. Sixty percent of the parts are interchangeable with an M16. It is the typical weapon of the American sharpshooter. The French sniper seems to have become utterly American.

With each shot, he hits the bull's-eye. With each shot, his face remains inscrutable. With each shot, he is only doing his job. The endless sky. The end of the world. The night is a black day.

Too much, magic bus!

The Ruger rifle is loaded with Remington .223 cartridges; not very high-caliber ammunition, especially for a light weapon like that. Yuri knows he can't hope to compete with the French sniper. His tactic is simple—fire as many cartridges, as quickly as possible, at the smallest possible area, from the shortest possible distance. The night is black and the stars are shining.

I want my magic bus—too much, magic bus!

These three horsemen, for example: slightly isolated, in the very center of the plateau around a hundred and fifty meters away, two of them

shouldering old French-made semiautomatic MAS-49 rifles, and the other an even older Enfield dating from the Second World War. The twenty .223 bullets explode in their direction, two or three per second, his finger whitening as it presses almost constantly on the trigger. The men scatter; he thinks he might have hit one of them, who stays flattened on his horse. The Mini-14 rifle is a greatly improved copy of the old Garand M14 used by the American army in the 1950s, but it is still a semiautomatic weapon, and he has to press the trigger for every shot. The Mossberg is less precise but more powerful; it fires at a wide range and uses well-tempered .12-caliber ammunition. At twenty-four meters it creams the two sub-officers coming as backup from the rocky ridge where the attack began in a single, well-judged, transversal shot; the spray of shot drops them side by side.

Now I've got my magic bus—too much, magic bus!

The Boche machine pistol can wait until later, a wild card to be played in an emergency.

As if on command, an emergency presents itself immediately.

Too much, magic bus ...

They don't have time to detect the maneuver.

The maneuver from the summit of the butte they came from.

The butte from where the *others* came from, too. Where the stars shine more brightly and a very fine sliver of moon casts its gentle light on sky and earth.

Night has fallen completely now. Campbell and Yuri have state-of-the-art binocular systems, portable and hardly thicker than diving goggles; Slade Vernier has a pair of powerful traditional binoculars that he regularly brings to his eyes, and of course there are the special cases of the Italians and the French sniper, with their integrated combat glasses.

The night will be their closest ally. It will be their only ally. It will be the luminous shadow of the Law of Bronze.

Everything happens very fast; abruptly, they are fired at from the back, from the west. They are fired at from the woods.

They are fired at from somewhere no one should be. The weak point of the fortress. Slade Vernier is hit in the leg; Yuri can see his silent grimace, the reflexive movement of his thigh, the blood that flows in thick streams. He notes that it barely slows the man from western Canada, who fires back

without the slightest hesitation. Suddenly, Yuri remembers that he is carrying the emergency Medikit—but that will have to wait. He brandishes his H&K and opens fire like a madman. Suddenly, he is a cerebral extension of the killing machine.

A dozen men, descending on them. Horses. Camels. Automatic AK-47, G3, and M16 rifles, Uzi and MAC-10 rapid-fire pistols—a true attack force. And on its heels, horsemen—and black shadows running on the earth, becoming a sea of ink. ...

Dogs.

Attack dogs.

Killer dogs.

At the same instant, in a perfect tactical conjunction, the firing begins again on the eastern side. Despite his wound, Slade Vernier is giving orders, assigning roles: Lecerf and the men from the truck against the guys east of the road; the others, including himself, against the horsemen and attack dogs. Projectiles explode in every direction. Yuri is concentrating on a group of two or three horsemen, firing a long volley of nine-millimeter bullets at them, when he feels a violent burning in his left leg. Firebrand-ember-spike-barbed wire, white hot, stabbing his flesh. He loses his balance and falls to the ground. Diagnosis: open wound. Large caliber. A lot of blood, gushing freely. Fast fast fast, the Medikit in the pickup, fast fast fast a clotting agent, fast fast fast an analgesic shot, fast fast fast an adrenaline shot, fast fast fast back into the battle, fast fast fast very fast kill more men.

His wound just barely staunched, Yuri resumes his post and fires at two camel riders from another group that has just joined the survivors from the first squadron, and he pitilessly eliminates their two Dobermans at almost the same time. He sees Chrysler tackled to the ground by a couple of ferocious rottweilers. He launches himself in that direction, dragging his injured leg, as fast as he can go, and lodges two bullets from his Sig Sauer in each canine spinal column; Slade Vernier has just cut away the hind legs of a pit bull with a single stroke of the needle-sharp blade of his bowie knife before cutting the animal's throat. Lecerf joins them; his face perfectly impassive, he fires four times and kills a horseman with each shot, then with four more bullets he takes off the heads of the pit bulls running behind them. Mathematical precision. Telescopic precision. The mathematics of a

killer's brain. He is already turning away again to continue firing long-range at the men from Maine.

Yuri reloads his H&K and resumes firing continuously at what remains of the assault group; he doesn't know how many he has hit, but when he becomes fully aware again his cartridge is clicking on empty, and none of the enemy men are there. Campbell, now armed with his semiautomatic Winchester SX3, blasts away at the pack of combat dogs that are only following their instincts, trying to kill them all.

The endless sky, the fiery stars, and the night, so black.

Parallel track: a group of combatants—horses, camels, motorcycles—heads straight for the Silverado at the exact moment when Slade Vernier is obliged to reload his AR-15 after having slapped together a makeshift bandage and emergency tourniquet for his wound. For the first time Yuri notes the motley, diachronic mixture of the enemy's weapons: hunting or military rifles from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of all makes, and also even older models, First or Second World War, and even bows and crossbows!

A Chinese grenade in each hand, he runs as well as he can over to the Silverado pickup and throws the "flash mixes" into the middle of the small troop of assailants. With a series of flashes and shock waves befuddling brains, Vernier has time to reload his weapon. Standing and stifling a groan, he showers the group—still immobilized by neurosensory trauma—with a long volley that cleanly kills several men; the rest scatter instantly in total chaos. The stars in blazes of light, the night in dense blackness. The black Fire of the secret day, the fire of the day of killers.

Pre-delay: Yuri empties another cartridge from his H&K into a horseman who is aiming a double-feathered competition arrow in his direction, and then another into the driver of a heavy Suzuki who is threatening him with a sawed-off compression cannon rifle. The bullets continue on their bloody way into the body of a camel that bears down on him just before he palms his Sig Sauer pistol and finishes off its rider. The beast falls bleating at his feet, and he puts four or five bullets into the head of the man who is vainly shaking an antique Thompson rifle with a drum loader.

Fire is coming from everywhere, and men are firing in all directions. Now Yuri is here again with the Mini-14, and then back there with the Mossberg, and farther away with the H&K, and then it starts all over again.

The stars, the fire, the night.

Mounted men, camel riders, bikers, guns, bows and arrows. Animal shrieks, roaring motors, explosions of gunfire. He is living an End Time western.

Gas from smoke grenades rises slowly into the night air; through the filter of amplified optics it dances in ghostly shapes of bluish fog. Orange flashes detonate against the silvery smoke as if on the surface of a broken mirror. Campbell, a predator of the Territory, an odd smile on his face, shoulders his AK-101. A long, crackling, bright yellow flame erupts in the ultraviolet night. Not far from there, Brother Francisco is decimating the attackers' southern flank. Yuri sees men fall in bunches from their mounts, animal and mechanical, or spin halfway around, their hands pressed to one part or another of their bodies.

The night is with them. The stars will be on their side. The fire is protecting them.

The six of them are a single organism now, half human and half arsenal, firing endlessly; the thundering roar is deafening.

He is there with the Ruger Mini-14, here with the Mossberg, farther away with the H&K. He is there under the stars, in the fire, with the night. He is there, against motorcycles, against horses, against camels. Against men.

Each individual moment is frozen in time, an iceberg against the universe. The ultraviolet sky is fixed on forgotten constellations. He sees, he hears, he knows, he listens on several distinct channels, like a multifrequency radio-telescope.

Campbell, Vernier, the soldier-monks, the French sniper, him, the night, the moonlight, the starfire, the gleaming steel of the heavy vehicles, the dark masses of the battle animals, the living shadows of the motorcycles on the plain.

Brother Francisco stands in front of the truck; concealed by the heavy bulletproof hulk, he fires long volleys from his Lombard army Sig Sauer SG551 automatic rifle, the Kevlar grip of which is covered with reproductions of angels and the Virgin. It looks like an excellent gun, with a thirty-shot clip and Remington .223-caliber bullets, a compact combat telescope, and camouflage coloring, typical of tactical units, widened at the front optic. Its fire is extremely powerful, something the soldier-monk is taking full advantage of.

His compatriot Brother Friedrich is a bit farther away. With his assault rifle, a Beretta AR70/90, unified Italian army model, NATO 5.56mm-

caliber ammunition, fitted with a long telescope of black Kevlar that gleams in the starlight, he has taken up a post on top of the panel between the cab and the platform. It's a good spot and affords him a good view; he fires in bursts of three shots each with the precision and calm of a machine.

Yuri's brain is like an organic calculator; everything is factored together even before it fully crosses his mind, like an illuminating rocket. The zenith, the North Star, Sirius, Vega, the Pleiades, Orion, Andromeda, Venus, Arcturus: all the Beauty of the stars is laid out for them on this night when the Beast is striking.

And Beauty sees the invisible, while the Beast can detect only what is obvious.

The night is black.

There is danger.

There. Yes. Now.

The impact of the blast is so devastating that Brother Friedrich is thrown backward. He falls heavily, like a sack of rags, to the ground, with a soft noise, without even a cry.

There is already blood on the asphalt; there is blood everywhere on the man's body, so much blood, colored ultraviolet in the binoculars. The night is red.

Campbell, who has just loaded his Remington 7615 patrol rifle with a twenty-cartridge magazine, sends a silent but very clear message to Yuri. His thin smile says everything as he shoulders his gun and opens fire on a group of horsemen and camel riders galloping toward them as a front line, backed up by several bikers and their last sidecar equipage.

We are the Camp Doctors.

Save him.

The final frontal attack erupts as Yuri approaches the man from the Vatican and drags him to shelter on a collapsible stretcher with retractable wheels, into a clump of pines about fifty meters off the road. Brother Friedrich isn't doing well at all. He is in a state of shock, having gotten two high-caliber bullets in the chest while a third ball dislocated his shoulder. Heavy Soviet 7.62-caliber bullets. The operational capacities of their Medikits are going to be pushed to their limits. It will be a white night.

First the wounds are thoroughly cleaned with Recyclo cotton wool and sprayed with analgesic and antibiotic ultraspray, disinfected with freeze-dried alcohol and then biodegradable antiseptic strips, and then the man is quickly injected with cardiostabilizers, neural antitraumatic and anticoma agents, microcapsules to prevent hemorrhaging and scar accelerants, programmable neuroleptics, and pseudomorphine. Chrysler prepares oxygen and the cardiopump as well as the first plasmosmart emergency bandage, and at the same time he cannot ignore the twenty or so mounted men bearing down on either side of them.

He sees Slade Vernier take down a half dozen men with a single lateral blast of his AR-15 before shouldering his huge Israeli Desert Eagle. The young French marksman, flat on his belly under the truck's platform and sheltered by its enormous uncrushable double tires, carefully takes out the entire rear line, diminishing the enemy forces via constant attrition, periodically picking off one of two members of the attack wave. On the other side, near the Ford pickup, Campbell and the other soldier-monk form a veritable battalion of two with the strength of their fire. The night is there; it is their ally. The stars are still watching over them.

It is war. And this man from the Vatican will surely die. At any rate, he will die if they can't finish off their attackers from Maine very soon. ...

Yuri sees an enormous shadow looming over him; he barely has time to hit the ground. To prepare himself for the worst.

It is a horse, a mustang; it is apparently coming from the west and it almost trampled him. The small man riding it is holding a rifle much like Yuri's own and he is firing it with one hand, haphazardly, aiming at the truck and screaming in a guttural language. Yuri wonders if the rider even saw him.

The men bearing down on the Silverado are stopped by the joint fire of Vernier and Campbell, who has come to support him. Those that try the same maneuver from the side of the Ford are taken down by Brother Francisco, prudently stationed at the angle of the pickup and the heavy military truck.

The French sharpshooter continues imperturbably killing men, whatever their distance or position; then, in a movement of astonishing fluidity, he turns and engages the small Islamic rider, who instinctively spurs his horse to safety in the underbrush. Not a chance, thinks Yuri; besides, the Frenchman's gun is empty. He reloads at lightning speed, but it is to

concentrate on the men swarming around the Silverado. Vernier is nearly submerged, and the other flank needs reinforcement. Campbell, his AK-101 firmly in hand, dashes back over to the Ford pickup. Both of them have spent their time in this way, running from one side to the other of the metal fortress, supporting the others when they are at the point of being overwhelmed. “The Firefighters of the Third Reich,” remembers Yuri, thinking of an old article about the Waffen-SS units at the Russian front he read once in the military library Campbell inherited from his father.

This is war. Beauty is wedded to the Beast.

Yuri observes the scene; around sixty meters in front of him, the mounted man is riding up out of the underbrush in a cloud of dust, reloading his rifle. He is wearing an Arab kaffiyeh printed with a black-and-white design that hides the lower half of his face; his eyes are filled with the irrepressible desire to kill.

The horse is a Canadian prairie mustang, white and tawny. Young. A beautiful little runner.

The rider sees Yuri and the body over which he is crouching. He does not hesitate for a fraction of a second. He bears down on them, shouting a sort of bark, kicking his horse hard, the rifle held firmly in one hand in front of him. He’ll fire when he gets close enough, thinks Yuri.

Very calmly, he takes the Tokarev from his cowboy holster, switches it to his left hand, and listens to the first bullet drop into the chamber with a dry click. Then, still without any nervousness at all, he pulls the nine-millimeter Sig Sauer from his shoulder holster—no need to cock it; he has used it so recently that it is still hot. In the space of two or three breaths he empties the two guns simultaneously into the horse and its rider, who has only time to fire one bullet in a reflexive motion; it arcs harmlessly into the trees.

A mountain of flesh collapses into the dust, rolling over on itself in a chaos of limbs and cloth. In the starlight it is like a strange meteorite crashing to earth.

Neither the horse nor the man moves. Yuri knows he got both of them cleanly. Ural-made 7.62-caliber bullets, the kind that won the Battle of Berlin. Given the ten bullets remaining in the magazine of the nine-millimeter German-Swiss gun, the rider doesn’t have a chance in hell. The night is black.

He approaches the two entangled creatures, man and horse united like a centaur in death. A bit higher up, on the road, the firing continues, but the

spaces between volleys are lengthening; the cracks of gunfire seem to be retreating in the direction of Maine. The night is black and the stars are shining.

He is very close to them, the man and the horse, the mass of intermingled flesh; his binoculars confirm the kill. The sky is ultraviolet; the mountain vegetation gleams like moon metal. The flesh is the color of electrical interference, the blood is a low vibration just above infrared. The night is black, the stars are shining. Men are killing one another.

He gets even closer to the two. Yes. He killed both of them cleanly.

The horse.

And the boy.

* * *

Anyone who has seen a battlefield after the battle knows the meaning of the word *desolation*.

Everyone is now aware of Yuri's discovery. The boy soldier was about the same age as Link de Nova—twelve, thirteen at most.

They have found six other bodies of children or young teenagers around the convoy, crushed under the masses of their sidecars, their mustangs, their camels, their motorbikes, their corpses full of holes of every caliber. They are dressed in various military uniforms and long Afghan-style brown tunics, Pashtun turbans and Arab kaffiyehs. They are pale beneath the watery light of the glacial moon. They seem even younger in death, as if their lost childhoods were revived at the moment of their deceases.

No one in the group really noticed their presence in the heat of combat.

Except the French sniper.

He gives them a technically perfect summary of the operation, concluding with a final stroke:

"The SR25M has an effective range of a little over eight hundred meters; it's a semiautomatic but still very precise up to that distance. At first I thought they had hired jockeys! When I realized the truth, I have to say it only strengthened my motivation. I wasn't going to let them become experienced adults."

It is truly the Law of the Territory. The Law of Bronze. The one that will crush everything in its path to save this library. Everything. Including a bunch of children.

“I should also tell you that I probably sniped the fucker that was commanding them. There, to the east, around six hundred meters away; he’ll be easy to find. He was riding a white stallion. His bodyguards were both kids I had just picked off; he had binoculars and he was speaking into a walkie-talkie. He was wearing a sort of khaki turban and a Nazi uniform.”

“A Nazi uniform?” Campbell repeats, intrigued.

“Yes, a gray-and-green German uniform from the Second World War, with swastikas and SS insignia. I am French. I would have recognized it without night vision.”

Yuri realizes that “Magic Bus” has been playing on repeat for almost an hour. During the entire battle, while men, horses, dogs, camels, and *children* were killing one another, the tape had imperturbably continued to play. *Too much, magic bus!*

The economy of the Territory has its own rules, more implacable than those of nature, since the Territory has outlived not only nature but its destruction. This economy is already in full activity. While Yuri puts together a complete plasmapack for Brother Friedrich’s chest, he can see the two poles of this singular organization click into place, geographically, ethically, *naturally*. Under the black sky, the dusting of stars, the curving silver sliver of the moon, the starlight reveals a whole secret world; the dark light of the night sky is the light best suited to portray this world, this economy, this way of life.

Slade Vernier, first: Yuri gave him the first emergency medical care; like Yuri, he had been lucky—the high-caliber bullet, fired at close range, had exited his body after piercing an outer section of the femur. Rather than risking gangrene or surgery in the middle of the night in a mountain desert, Yuri had administered a transcutaneous-osmosis triple bandage and then placed a powerful Textromed exomembrane over the wound to keep the partially broken bone in place.

Vernier’s enormous Desert Eagle, loaded with .50-caliber bullets, gleams in the diamond light of the moon. He limps heavily as he walks; the wound is severe, but he marches with absolute, mechanical regularity. It is the Law of Bronze—he may limp, but he will walk.

The economy of the Territory has its own, very strict rules, and one of them is “Never waste anything.” Salvage everything. Chrysler is busily doing just that, loading a rolling stretcher with all the weapons and ammunition he can find. He searches each soldier carefully, without any

pointless brutality. For him, they are only merchandise. Or, rather, they are *the market*.

Slade Vernier, beginning his progress toward the other side of the plateau, is not following the same section of the Bronze law book. He is not salvaging; he is taking. He does not exercise any *pointless* brutality, either.

The first body is quickly turned over. Vernier searches pockets and holsters but does not find what he is looking for. The Desert Eagle recoils in his hand as the man's head explodes. The night is black.

On to the second body. The man is only wounded; he stirs and seems to be asking for help. But the problem is that he can't help Slade Vernier. He takes a 12.7-millimeter bullet right in the face. The night is black, and yet full of stars.

The third body seems more interesting. Vernier takes from it a large-caliber revolver, .357 Magnum-type, and the corresponding belt full of bullets, without difficulty. If infinity were quantitative, the sky would be constantly illuminated by all the suns in this infinite universe. But the night is black, and the stars are shining.

This time it is with the newly acquired revolver that he fires a bullet into the man's head, dead or not. What he was looking for was a weapon with which to finish his work without wasting his own bullets. The entire Law of the Territory is encapsulated here. The Law of the Territory is the Law of the Night.

He moves on calmly to the next body. Yuri watches as he serenely lights an enormous Cuban cigar acquired who knows where, which he inhales with an expression of ecstasy before firing a bullet into the neck of the man, who seemed dead already. The Law of the Territory is the Law of the stars that shine in the Night.

He continues, limping; he continues with rigorous constancy, going on to the next one, a wounded man who tries weakly to extend an arm in a pathetic gesture of self-protection. A bullet to the head and the arm relaxes, falls to the side of the body; Vernier's hand trembles only at the moment of ejection of the heavy .357 Magnum cartridge. The starlit night sky shows everything. At night it is the stars that serve as a sun, for those who know how to capture their light.

Every six steps, Vernier patiently takes six new bullets from the belt draped over his shoulder. Every three steps or so, he inhales and exhales a deep puff of his cigar.

Between the men, wounded or not, he does not fail to take what he wants from the animals, wounded or not. They are sometimes sprawled on the ground with their riders, sometimes a short distance away, sometimes still standing, wavering on their feet, trying to walk in one direction or another.

A man, a horse, a man, a camel, a man, a man.

The economy of the Law of Bronze in action, the Law of the Convoy-Library. The night is black and overflowing with luminous stars. Chrysler gathers weapons and ammunition; the deputy sheriff is finishing up with the dead, conserving his bullets. Thirty bodies are scattered over what can in truth be called a battlefield. Yuri cannot tear his gaze away from the two men's methodical ballet, like an antique funerary right dedicated to the warrior gods who live in the mountains.

The night sky seems to be waiting for expiatory sacrificial victims, as if a gaping mouth will open at the zenith to swallow them up.

This is Slade Vernier's version of the Law of the Territory. He won't have any heads cut off. No time, no point, inefficient in this situation. But there will be no survivors among the bandits from Maine.

None. No men, no animals.

Not even any children. They will remember the Territory Convoy for a long time.

The Law of Bronze dominates the night of the asbestos mountains. The Law of Bronze protects them, them and their library. It has no pity for anything, or anyone.

It is an infinitely reassuring feeling, thinks Yuri.

A feeling that corresponds, he realizes, to the scope of the terror he is capable of inflicting on others.

28 > *RIDERS ON THE STORM*

Forty men. In forty-five minutes. By six of them. Five and a half, really.

Six to seven victims per person, on average. Around one every seven minutes. From another statistical angle, one enemy killed every seventy-five seconds. And that's not counting the men taken out of combat that the vanguard took with them when they retreated toward Maine.

Vernier counted them all carefully as he fired a bullet into the head of each one. His zeal had even extended to asking the French sniper to take him up the butte, to the north, and then near the rocky ridge to the south, and finally six hundred meters straight west, in order to make absolutely sure that his work was finished.

There would be no survivors. None.

When he had returned from his patrol, he said: "We found the guy in the Nazi uniform. And the boys Lecerf mentioned." And then: "And two or three others."

Any additional commentary would be superfluous. No one can survive the passage of the Convoy; the remnants of the force that attacked them must be on the other side of Quebec by now, in New Brunswick, or in Maine. You don't attack a Territory Convoy. *And, Yuri adds to himself, there can be no impunity when it comes to a Papal Convoy.*

The Convoy and the Forty Thieves. They are creating a myth, a legend that

will sweep the entire Northeast. *Each of us is a soldier-monk; we are the Guardians of the Sacred Library, and every bandit in the region better get that into*

his thick skull, if he hasn't already. As deeply into his skull as a .50-caliber bullet

fired by Slade Vernier.

Around them, the strip excavations of Thetford Mines are vast arenas of chrysotile, giant craters whose walls descend in concentric spirals into the

heart of the earth; it is like standing on a piece of the moon that has been teleported to eastern Quebec. The huge mines are nothing now but archaeological remnants of a long-gone world, vanished even before the Metastructure. At that time, forgotten or nearly so, men worked the Earth in order to reach the Sky. Now they no longer work; they have abandoned the Sky and allowed what remains of the Earth to control their destinies.

According to Campbell's estimations, they were attacked by around sixty men, seventy-two at most, the standard number in a *katyba* of neo-Islamist franc-tireurs. Apparently their armies are often composed of child soldiers. "The bandits had a numeric advantage over us," says Chrysler, "but we knew how to stay compact, how to help each other, how to act in a coordinated way. We handed those bastards their own asses."

Of course, there is more to be said on the topic. They put forty men out of combat, dead or wounded, seriously or not. And Vernier had taken it upon himself to balance out the equation; he had made everything clearer, more readable, more definable. He had counted to forty and turned all the numbers into a single and terrible zero.

The neo-Islamists from Maine don't understand Territory mathematics at all; they know nothing of the Law of Bronze. They didn't know how to see at night; they hadn't had the support of starfire, or the allegiance of the ultraviolet sky.

The arithmetic of death provides you with a sort of map on which the darkest areas indicate the light to be found, light that will blind you remorselessly.

The Law of Bronze imposes itself with a vengeance; it seems to have an insatiable need for men of their type.

"I think you'll be able to congratulate yourself fully when Brother Friedrich is definitively out of danger," says Brother Francisco.

Campbell grimaces.

"We'll be out of the Bois-Francs soon and in the Estrie. In twenty-four hours at the most, we'll be in the Territory," he points out.

Yuri is silent. The four of them are in the truck, transformed now into a makeshift ambulance. The so-called Francisco Alpini is at the wheel; Campbell is in the passenger seat, with Friedrich Ostermann lying in the

cab's large rear compartment and Yuri hunkered down beside him, keeping an eye on the patient.

Vernier is driving the Ford pickup at the head of the convoy; the young French sniper bringing up the rear in the Silverado. Speeds up to sixty kilometers an hour are easy now. "The roads will get better as our altitude decreases," Campbell remarks. "We should get there before night tomorrow, I'm sure of it."

Yuri sighs deeply. There is one certainty, and only one: the man called Friedrich Ostermann has only a few hours left. The plasmapack and cardio-pump are doing what they can, as is the intrapulmonary microrespirator—as is Yuri himself—but the initial hemorrhages were too severe, the impact of powerful military bullets fired at close range much too heavy for his body. If he is to survive, they need to get the bullets out of him as soon as possible, and Yuri is not really equipped to perform such a procedure, unless he goes back to military surgical techniques from the time of the Thirty Years' War.

They killed forty men. And they will lose one.

This man who will die in the foothills of the Notre Dame Mountains will never have seen America except to die here, saving a library that is not even his. His tomb will face the Saint Lawrence estuary amid desolate mountains where no one ever comes. He left the heart of the Old World, the Eternal City, to die in the northernmost reaches of the Appalachians.

He came. He conquered. He disappeared.

A man's death can be the best opportunity for a group to fuse together forever, to become a single living entity, with all its contradictions.

In this sense, death can be a creator; all you have to do is look it right in the eyes.

Dawn is just breaking when they begin to dig. They all work together. Picks, shovels, sweat, silence.

Brother Friedrich Ostermann died at the border of L'Amiante and Asbestos counties, near the huge glacial Lake Aylmer, in the place called Moose Bay, a few miles from a city called Beaulac-Garthby—deserted, half destroyed, probably the victim of violent confrontations between various armed groups.

Yuri had told Campbell they needed to stop the convoy; then, in reply to his silent question, he had said to Francisco Alpini: “I think he wants to say something to you. And I think they will be his last words.”

Then, with the convoy halted in the middle of the road, they had changed places.

Yuri had watched the ritual of prayer and benediction with fascination. He heard snippets of incomprehensible murmurs and brief whispered dialogues; he saw Brother Francisco gently close his comrade’s eyes and then make the strange gesture also common in the communities of HNV, the sign of the cross.

Friedrich Ostermann had died at the moment the day was being born in this America he would never see. He died in the very embers of the night, the embers of starfire. He died at the gates of dawn, entering gates more luminous still.

He died for men he didn’t even know; men that lived on another world, for a library he knew nothing of, for a Territory he would never see—but he had not died in vain. He died getting the Convoy through; he died for the life of the books; he died so that humanity would not be completely reduced to a catalog of numeric organs.

Yuri wonders for an instant where the strange feeling is coming from, both intellectual and emotional, that is assaulting him.

There is a paradox here, one that raises up the man they are burying.

Certainly, he is dead. And yet it is as if he has never been so alive.

Culture shock happens in all types of situations. Even the most improbable ones can bring it fully into view.

When the grave is dug, it becomes evident that they have nothing with them to make a decent coffin. The idea of using one of the steel boxes in the back of the truck is ventured by Slade Vernier, who quickly realizes that he would have done better to keep quiet.

“We have a large, fireproof tarp—white, a little silvery,” Yuri says. “Do you think it would work as a shroud?”

Brother Francisco asks to see it. The exposed surface of the tarp is indeed metallic gray, but the inside is pale, soft, opalescent.

“This will be perfect,” he says.

He goes to the back of the truck and returns with a simple Bible in his hands. He places it between Brother Friedrich's stiffening fingers and then, from one of the large inside pockets of his long leather cloak, he takes a Celtic-style black steel cross, very plain, with no decoration, and places it at the body's feet.

"It came from a monastery in Cornwall that was destroyed shortly after he took his first vows there. He carried it everywhere with him."

Stating a simple truth, Campbell says: "He will have carried it with him to the very end."

"Let's wrap him in the shroud, and then we'll lower him down with ropes."

"In which direction?" asks Campbell, innocently.

Francisco Alpini knits his brow. "What do you mean, in which direction?"

Campbell shrugs. "I don't know. You're from Rome. You work for the Pope. I thought the body had to be pointing toward the Vatican."

The man turns pale. Yuri hears the great tension in his voice as he explains: "We are Catholics, Mr. Campbell. Rome is not Mecca; no one expects us to turn toward the Holy See five times a day. Am I making myself clear?"

Campbell retreats into silence. Yuri attempts an answer. "I don't know where I heard it, probably in HMV somewhere, but someone told me the first Christians prayed to the rising sun."

"That's quite right. You're very well educated for a non-convert. But there are no rules on this subject in the Catholic Church. We pray to the setting sun just as often, I can assure you, Mr. McCoy. Christianity isn't a sun-worshipping religion."

Yuri, deep in thought, doesn't reply.

Though it was totally off the subject, Campbell has brought up a real problem—an unforeseen one, a problem that requires thought.

A problem that necessitates telling the truth, creating the living organism that will know how to bring together all the elements required for an authentic synthesis.

The night. Fire. Stars. The Convoy. Then. The Library. Heavy Metal Valley. Dawn. Maps. Territories. "The" Territory. The Mission. The World. The Territory and its Law of Bronze. It is clearer than all the shadows seen through combat binoculars.

“I think we should bury him with his head facing west, Mr. Alpini. America is still the West. Here, the East is behind you, the Old World, the past, the Atlantic. What counts isn’t where he came from, but where he went, what he did, and why. He went toward the West like all pioneers; he followed the sun.”

Yuri is astonished by his own conviction.

Brother Francisco says simply: “We will do as Mr. McCoy has explained.”

* * *

The sun has risen in the east, painting the landscape pale gold. They have just buried the man, his head facing west. The remaining soldier-monk took the black steel cross and planted it firmly on top of the burial mound; the glaring light of daybreak projected the blue shadow of the crucifix onto the fresh earth. Then he recited words in a language that Yuri, like the others, doesn’t know, but that he identifies as Latin, *the sacred language of the Catholic Church*.

The sun’s light seems to brighten, as if a new source is being born near it. Yuri doesn’t know why, but in a reflexive gesture he shyly imitates the sign of the cross that Brother Francisco has just made over himself at the conclusion of his prayer, along with the men from H.M.V. Campbell does the same, hastily, without much conviction.

Of all of us here, Yuri thinks, only Campbell and I aren’t baptized. But we are the ones who led this mission for the Vatican.

The Vatican and the Territory.

And now, Yuri watches uncomprehendingly as the soldier-monk holds out the Italian-made assault rifle that belonged to the man they just buried.

“When he was dying, Brother Friedrich said to me: ‘Give my gun to the young man who tried to save my life, and who has accompanied me on this final part of my voyage.’ I believe you’re the young man he was speaking of.”

Yuri observes the scene like a spectator behind a two-way mirror. The night has become day; the starfire has concentrated into a single sun, and the ultraviolet light, now invisible, shines high above the clouds. A gun is being held out to him like a knight’s sword. It is very simple and yet hugely solemn, with the true solemnity of all heavenly moments, these moments

where everything else vanishes before ancient rituals believed forgotten but vibrantly alive in the depths of memory.

Brother Friedrich died so the Convoy could get through, so the Library could reach the Territory unimpeded; he died going west; he died and he left his soldier-monk's weapon to Yuri, who could not save him.

We may be the Camp Doctors, thinks Yuri, but outside the Territory we are nothing but the surgeons of Death; we kill much better than we heal.

The sun casts its light on the mountains, beyond the slopes to the banks of the river, the yellow beams bouncing off the points of the rocks, illuminating the sharp grass on the vast plateaus, exploding in crystals of fire in the leaves of the trees, gilding the bends in the roads that wind through the brush, glittering in the dusty roads with chrome-colored sparkles and on the asphalt road with golden spray. It is one of the most beautiful mornings he has ever seen in his life.

Yuri takes the gun in his hands carefully; the steel is sharp and cold against his flesh. It is the initial, essential, ultimate moment: the meeting, the adoption, the domestication of the weapon, like the operational appropriation of a new machine, a new prosthesis, a new organ.

"Thank you," he says simply.

And he thinks: *This gun guarded the Library; it guarded the Territory's Convoy; it killed many men. This is only the beginning of its mission; I will keep it safe so that it can finish its work. No one will be able to stop us, it, and me.*

They have just arrived in the Estrie, near Saint-Georges-de-Windsor, when the storm breaks. The sky is blue-violet, like twilight. The night of day, thinks Yuri. Night contained within the day.

They had to leave the 112, which leads straight to Sherbrooke, in order to avoid the area around Lake Megantic and the New Hampshire border. No question of repeating the scene from a western with the neo-Islamists that lurk there. They had instead taken the 161 to Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens and then turned south, taking the small 216 and then the 249.

The road has become problematic again. Everyone concentrates on the potholes and deep cracks in the road; everyone works with the machines, with the engines, with pure mechanics; everyone forms a sort of cyborg organism inching forward under the gray-green sky.

Then, suddenly, it begins falling like a vertical ocean. It has been threatening for more than an hour, this storm; it came very fast from the north, from Labrador, in the baroque splendor of tall mountains of altocumulus clouds, growing blacker and blacker, violet and blue.

In a single instant, after a few large signaling drops, the storm empties itself onto them in a continuing deluge that creates a wall of water. A wall of water falling from the sky. The whole universe trembles behind a giant lens, blurred by a kaleidoscope of pure crystal.

The Great Flood must have been terribly beautiful, thinks Yuri.

They cross the boundary of Asbestos County and Le Val-Saint-François County in the pouring rain. Their vehicles are metal boxes in the grip of the elements as they play their titanic geopolitical game. Streaming windows, flooded roads, the sky in fury.

The storm is slowing them down, certainly, but it is also keeping away most of the large paramilitary groups active in the east. Reconnaissance squads like the one they faced the previous night are keeping to the shelter of their camps. The Territory Convoy continues driving endlessly. It will get through.

The elements are on their side—black night, blue day, stars, sun, stormy morning, crimson night.

The Convoy will get through. It will ride out this storm as it has done with all the obstacles encountered so far, natural or human. The Convoy does not seem to belong completely to this planet; a bit like an extraterrestrial object, it has come to play with this world and the men that inhabit it. It has literally acted like a machine, like a *trap*.

No, muses Yuri, it doesn't belong to this world at all. The Convoy came from the Vatican to reach the Territory. It came to *the edge of the world*.

Their moving trinomial draws its power, on the other hand, only from the few humans driving it. The Convoy is not only the heavy military truck and the two pickups; it is the six men—the *five* men, he corrects himself—the five living men and the dead one that have kept it safe. It is the fateful conjunction of a few men and a few machines. A few hunters and a few traps. And the elements.

The day is dark; the sky is starless, and yet an ardent fire smolders within the clouds.

Water. Sky. Earth. Fire.

The quaternary convergence of catastrophes. The crucifixion of the world. The cardinal conjunction: water is submerging the earth, falling from the sky; it contains fire, and the shadows are full of light.

The Territory Convoy will not let itself be stopped by the flood, or by anything else, not even the end of this world. It is an integral part of the end of this world; it is an integral part of the flood; it is the heavy metal that is an integral part of the highest clouds.

The Territory has moved, with its Law of Bronze; it, and nobody else, went to seek this library at the very tip of the Gaspé, and it killed all those men.

They are the Territory; the Territory is them. The Convoy is the de-territorialization of the Law.

Water falls from the sky like an endless liquid meteor shower; the drowned landscape appears in vaporous fractals behind the fluid walls.

The Ford pickup is only a hundred meters in front of them now; it is regularly being hit by waves that slide down from the high plateaus, gorged with mud and plant detritus of all sorts: broken branches, fallen trunks, mixed leaves, uprooted brush, and shrubs in bunches. The vehicle is shaken and pushed; it slides, hydroplaning constantly on the liquid surface of the road; it swerves, drives through several meters of an inundated hole before regaining slightly firmer ground.

Vernier did not finish off forty men for nothing. He is not going to let himself be dominated by a simple storm. Water from the sky, fire in the clouds, submerged earth—this is his realm, his domain. This is the world in which he knows how to live.

Water. Sky. Earth. Fire.

As if something is determined to test them at all costs. Something that is trying to make a *selection*.

They have to get through. They have crossed the mountains, avoided two brigades of a thousand men each, repulsed a band of Islamist fighters. They have made the night and the starlight their surest allies. Beauty is on their side, to vanquish the Beast, and it has demonstrated that the latter can have no fiercer enemy. Because Beauty is a weapon of mass destruction. Death does not respect the Beast; it uses it. But Death can do nothing to Beauty; indeed, in some cases, Beauty overwhelms Death itself.

It is enough, to not know how to serve it but to dare to enter its service.

They will get through. They are getting through. Nothing can keep them from getting through.

The storm will not stop them. Actually, thinks Yuri, they should really think of it as a sign of welcome, of hope. Of collusion.

The sky is angry, but its anger is protecting us. The Law of Bronze reigns in the upper atmosphere. The sky and the Territory are bound in an invisible knot. The Law is that knot. When it decides to show itself to the eyes of men, they die.

The storm is talking to us, and it is saying: *If your heavy metal reaches the Territory again, it will be because you are worthy of it.*

* * *

Lightning flashes in the depths of the night-black sky.

It is the fire of the nocturnal day. The fire of the starless sky. Fire from the clouds. Fire born of air and water.

In all forms. Of all intensities. Vertical, horizontal, diagonal. Rectangular. Zigzag. Single and in bunches. Monolinear and in luminous rhizomes, diffracting in multiple branches or roaring with an infinity of ephemeral microexplosions, filling the sky with immense conjunctions of high-voltage electricity or showering it with a rain of electricity as brief as it is sparkling, the flashes shooting their titanic arrows across the universe.

And the thunder in heavy percussion that punctuates each flash of light, and the water of the celestial ocean whose waves are rolling across the earth, and the men who drive in their metal machines. And the road itself, disappearing rapidly in front of them in a maelstrom of mingled elements.

The flashes *do not light* the diurnal night sky of the storm. The flashes do not light. They illuminate.

They consume the air in their path. They dig craters in the earth, where they fight with one another; they start fires with the speed of a laser beam after they cross the water without the slightest diffraction.

When a flash *illuminates* a landscape that way, it does not make it easier to see, because what you can discern has nothing to do with nature in its “normal” state. The fire from the flash creates considerable interference in the field of observation. These flashes are no longer simply photons emitted by the microscope and becoming part of the Heisenberg principle; they are megavolts of electricity that freeze everything in their explosive light,

firstly your optic nerve. A landscape lit by a volley of flashes is as little recognizable as one drowning in the light of an atomic bomb.

Light changes the world without even touching it, thinks Yuri.

Light is still the most dangerous phenomenon of all.

Because the truth is often such a singular landscape, revealed for an instant by the flying electricity of a flash of lightning.

Like lightning, the truth does not light; it illuminates. It obliges you to accept being blinded in order to see it.

“We’re coming to Saint-Grégoire-de-Greenlay,” says Campbell. “We need to go west, by Kingsbury, to pick up 243 again, and go through Racine and then Waterloo. Then we’ll take the 215 to Brome Lake; we should get away from Sherbrooke as soon as possible.”

The road map is spread out on his knees; his technical language breaks the silence, otherwise punctuated only by cracks of thunder.

Yuri continues to gaze attentively at the celestial storm and the lightning flashes that accompany it; he fiddles mechanically with the gun he got from the soldier-monk.

The flashes, the fire of the diurnal night, and the water from the sky are our allies. The storm is our ally.

We are the Territory Convoy.

We are what is left of humanity on Earth.

We are as dangerous as the lightning flash of truth.

29 > *GET READY*

Lashed with rain, the hills of Little Congo look like tall, ghostly waves, dark, drowning in liquid light.

From the top of the butte, his mobile home overlooks the whole area, all the way to the former highway and even beyond the dry savannas of Omega Blocks. The rain has been falling continuously since morning; a violent storm is breaking over southeastern Quebec. The storm is crashing in waves against the side of the butte, and given its intensity this will likely continue into the night.

The problem with this global ecological crisis, this blurring of the seasons coupled with the catastrophic conjunction of the elements, is that it slows everything down. Jade Silverskin is part of the generation that grew up with the Metastructure. He was a child when the cult of speed was at its apogee. The time when you could connect your brain to the NeuroNet in a few nanoseconds. The time when you could change your sex in thirty minutes, and your entire body in the space of a week. The time when it took less than eight hours on an antipodal plane to cross from pole to pole. The time when it took a split second to wipe a city from the map, and a few thousandths of a second for a hyperkinetic missile to reach its target.

It was the Golden Age of the Metastructure. No more need for progress in the strict sense; progress formed the very mesh of the world—so well, in fact, that it had frozen, immobilized in a perpetual and circular dynamic. Speed itself had become the gyratory center of humanity, to the extent that once the general kinetics necessary and sufficient for humans to live in Great Universal Peace had been attained, the Metastructure had known how to keep itself from any possible exceeding of that limit. The Metastructure had been intelligent enough to give men prosperity, efficiency, security, and even a good dose of knowledge, but it had also been prudent enough to not give them freedom, science, or the risk of thought. It had known how to

preserve humanity in a stasis of quasi-universal happiness for a quarter of a century.

With the Metastructure gone, speed had no longer been the center of the world; it had moved farther and farther into the margin.

For him, any slowing down is dangerous in an ontological sense. It threatens his very being, and it threatens the world he has built for himself. And, especially, it threatens the link that joins them. An artificial world that tries as best as it can to replicate the world of the era of the Metastructure. An umbilical cord that connects this small piece of the world from Before the Fall with what has survived of his modified organism. Input/output.

Except that the Metastructure is dead. And another entity seems to have taken possession of the Earth and of Humanity in its place. Nature abhors a vacuum. Artifice even more so.

And, more importantly still, there are people in the Territory who know how to stop this “entity.” And now he is going to know who those people are.

“Vegas, Vegas, my friend, I hope you’ve come with the news we’re so anxious for.”

This is Silverskin, in his role as member of the androgynous elite, Neon Park aristocrat, baron of the peaks of Little Congo, prince of transformist surgery, king of his own dreams.

“Tonight, Mr. Silverskin. Remember, the meeting is for tonight.”

The news is good, but everything always takes too much time.

“I hope the storm won’t cause any problems.”

It wouldn’t surprise him, a last-minute cancellation due to the unpredictable elements.

“It will be pretty late; midnight, one A.M., as usual. The storm will be well over by then.”

An excellent thing, habit. It lets others easily anticipate what you are going to do.

“How did you convince Pluto Saint-Clair?”

It is a key question. From the answer, he will decide whether to keep trusting Vegas or not.

“What do you think? When I was following him, I noticed that the little man’s clients were heaping musical instruments on him.”

Surprise.

“Musical instruments?”

“Yeah, an electric guitar and some kind of keyboard in a big black box.”

“A synthesizer?”

“Maybe; I don’t know, but I recognized the guitar. So I told Pluto Saint-Clair I’d pay him in guitars.”

Silverskin watches the rain falling in slanting sheets in the gusting wind. They are going to reverse the course of things; they are going to get their hands on the man and his secret, and there will be a change in who has the power.

“Do you have any news about the two men we hired, the ones who disappeared ten days ago?”

“Still nothing. The only solid trail points to Deadlink, but we didn’t find anything there. One of our teams heard something about Neon Park, but they found nothing there, either. Some other guys are saying they fled the Territory.”

“To go where? And do what?”

“That’s their problem. When we’ve successfully completed our operation, we’ll be able to buy all the Triads and gangs in Junkville.”

Vegas is not a complete fool. He survived the era of the Metastructure, and he knew how to adapt when it disappeared and to prepare himself, instinctively, for the next phase. No, he isn’t a fool. But he lacks what truly moves intelligence. Willpower. In the sense of a will that can take on the dimensions of a world.

“We’ve never had a better idea than following Pluto Saint-Clair. Are you talking about the two teenagers he went to find in New Arizona? We can’t lose track of them.”

“Yeah, but they’re nomads; they never stop moving. If it turns out that they aren’t even in Junkville ...”

“Then we’ll take care of them, you can be sure of that. What counts is that Pluto Saint-Clair took you where he needed to.”

“Yes, and when I went to see him, and put the deal directly in his hands, he didn’t put up any resistance. On the contrary, he seemed happy.”

“You think? What, like he won’t take out his little commission?”

Everything can be bought in Junkville. As a local proverb says, *Even what can’t be bought is for sale.*

“Of musical instruments?”

Vegas is sometimes a little slow on the uptake, thinks Silverskin, absorbed by the spectacle of the rain lashing the hills of Little Congo. But that doesn't matter—actually, it's better that his intelligence is relatively limited. He won't guess what his actual purpose is. Now to explain:

“He must have made a specific arrangement with the man you saw. But—tell me, how were you able to sell electric guitars in exchange for contact?”

“Very simply, in fact. I knew a prostitute named Clarion Davis in Toy Division. He happened to have several twentieth-century electric guitars; they didn't work anymore, but he was keeping them. I went to see him with forty liters of gasoline, the last I had, and a few trinkets. He told me to go fuck myself. ‘Two fenders and a Guild from the 1980s against your jerricans of gasoline,’ he said. ‘Wake up, you're dreaming.’”

A good retort. The rain pounding the countryside. Power within arm's reach.

“And?”

“And? Now he won't wake up again, and he'll sleep without dreams. I grabbed the three guitars, and when I talked about them to Pluto he seemed honestly stunned. ‘You'll make an excellent impression,’ he said to me. ‘I think the best thing would be to put one aside for yourself at the next contact.’”

Vegas is not loyal; he has an interest here. His intelligence is relatively limited, remember; he acted quickly on instinct. Did he take all possible precautions?

“No witnesses?”

“Don't worry about that. Less than none.”

“What did you do with the body?”

“Nothing. What could I have done? I don't work for the Triads. I just started a little fire with gasoline and some starter. Then I got the hell out of there.”

“Ah, so that was the fire the other night.”

“Yep. Destroyed all the evidence. His Combi-Cube was reduced to ashes, and him with it. I couldn't help the two or three others that burned around it.”

No matter. It might even be good, this series of collateral damages. There are no designated police in Junkville, just private investigators, and so much the better for them to be lost in speculation for as long as possible.

“I really think you did excellently well. Do you feel ready for tonight?”

“More ready than ever. Not only will I be immunized but I’ll find out their secret, and we’ll have them right where we want them—if you’re still with me.”

“Vegas, my friend, would I have any reason not to be with you in this? Of course you will find out their secret. And then we’ll surely have them by the balls. How did it happen, this contact you spied on?”

Make him tell the story. Pick out some detail that doesn’t match with the preceding version. Test him with the lie detector of your brain—by far the best lie detector ever invented.

“As I told you before, I followed Pluto to New Arizona. He picked up the two boys and their junk in his old Mazda hatchback and they went straight toward Neon Park, and then to Lake Champlain. I saw the little man in a clump of bushes there, but from behind. I couldn’t see exactly what happened, but there was an exchange, and then the sort of strange shamanic medicine I told you about.”

“It isn’t shamanic medicine,” Jade Silverskin replies.

“Oh, no?”

“No. It’s something else. Something else we have to understand.”

Yes. And as soon as possible. Because it is on this point that everything else rests: What is the “technology” used against an entity that destroys all technology?

“Don’t worry, Mr. Silverskin; once I’ve established contact and been immunized, we’ll move on to the next phase of the plan. Believe me, they’ll quickly tell us everything we need to know. Neither Pluto Saint-Clair nor the man with the secret powers will be able to refuse us anything. It’s incredible what the simple fear of death can accomplish.”

Vegas is a patsy. A little piece of trash. He’s probably killed several men in his life. And he has probably done worse than that. He is right, of course.

“We’re going to need to ask more than that of them,” says Silverskin. “We’ll have to ask them to betray everything they believe in.”

“Everything they *believe* in? What do you mean?”

Naturally. What could a man like Vegas believe in?

“Betray their friends, in the first place. The Professor from Texas, particularly. They will do everything we want them to—because we’ll have the man with the secret powers.”

It is not Junkville of which they will become the undisputed kings, or the Territory, or Quebec, or the state of New York.

They might not rule the world.

But, Jade Silverskin muses, the role of *American Caesar* would suit him perfectly.

The power to be gained is immense, and the throne long vacant.

They reach the Territory at the time Campbell promised. The sun is just swallowing up the line of the Ontario horizon as they drive along the northern bank of Lake Champlain. Territory tumbleweeds welcome them, sweeping past in front of them like gray-green floral stars.

WELCOME TO THE GRAND JUNCTION MOHAWK TERRITORY.

During the last few hours of the return trip, there was not a word spoken in the cab. The storm had eviscerated itself above Maine and the rain had stopped, but the whole atmosphere had still been supercharged with a crystalline vapor that hid the world behind a translucent filter, in which each ray of light shimmered in a pointillist infinity of diffractions rising into the skies.

Everyone was lost in his own mystery; everyone saw his own vision of the Territory; everyone was lost in his own night, his own fire.

For Yuri, it ended by crystallizing into a strange certainty, still foreign to what he is, and yet solidified into an immovable block at the center of his being.

In the space of a few days, he has passed to the other side of the unknowable barrier. First there were the two men on Row 299. A simple introduction, an opening, a preliminary sketch. A first contact.

Then the night of the Great War, the night of starfire, the night of the ultraviolet sky, the night when he killed all those men. The Night of the red orgy.

In a week, he has gone from a zero score to a two-figure number. He is so terribly human that in the space of seven days—the time it took God to complete his entire Creation, from what he knows of Christian myth—he has erased a dozen human beings from the surface of the earth.

He has become a killer.

He is much more dangerous than he ever suspected.

He is a man.

He has come home.

To where other men like him live.

The Library. The vast marine-blue containers of the Italian air and sea force. The twelve thousand books.

They are what count more than anything else. They are why so many men had to be killed. They are why one man was lost on the journey.

Brother Francisco activates the system of jacks and hoists that allows the enormous metal cubes to slide onto large platforms pulled by four powerful Dodge Ram 3500 pickups Djordjevic, Zarkovsky, Sheriff Langlois, and one of his deputies have assembled near Bulldozer Park. The Library can thus be more easily taken to the new trailer they have just attached to their laboratory, in an area too narrow for the truck to access. The activity of a small beehive is already buzzing on the tarmac.

Introductions were made with the urgency and gravity of an impending attack. It was as if everyone already knew who everyone was, without identities being truly revealed. We are definitely back in the Territory, muses Yuri; everyone communicates secretly here.

He watches the containers move slowly onto the pickups' platforms. He looks at Professor Zarkovsky, who has a nearly ecstatic expression on his face. He looks at Milan Djordjevic, whose gaze is lost between two worlds, the one in which the Library has just arrived, and the one it came from. He watches Gabriel Link de Nova, who arrives with his mother, the android with auburn hair who is always dressed in black. He watches Sheriff Langlois, the man of the Law of Bronze, deep in discussion with Slade Vernier, the man who knew how to ensure that it was respected, a thousand miles from his territory, and who must be giving him a detailed rundown of the operation. He looks at Campbell, who is calmly watching the whole container-loading procedure. He gazes up at the sky, dusted with vaporous points of light en route to extinction, the last wispy remnants of twilight.

He watches Brother Francisco approach the containers to unlock their heavy steel locks.

He sees the synchronous movement of Djordjevic and Zarkovsky toward the huge metal boxes, as if attracted by some secret source.

Then, he sees Judith Sevigny.

And everything else immediately fades away.

* * *

He has killed more than ten men and he will be twenty-three years old in a month, during the equinox.

He has killed more than ten men and he is falling in love with this girl.

He has killed more than ten men and he imagines that he will probably kill a lot more.

Brother Francisco has just opened the last container when Yuri shakes himself from his fascinated contemplation of the young woman. Can it be that Beauty has transfigured him to this extent in the space of ten days? Can it be, more exactly, that the spatial and temporal distance has created in him, and not in her, an abyss into which his entire being seems to have been thrown, like that Greek philosopher into the heart of a volcano?

Why is this happening now? Now, when the Library has come here. Now that he has killed all those men so that it could get here.

Djordjevic and Zarkovsky climb up onto the side of the platforms to get a closer look at the contents of the huge metal boxes, and to make sure that nothing was damaged during the long voyage. They examine each container in turn. Everything seems to be intact.

The Professor extracts a bright orange, almost red, volume: “Duns Scotus!” he cries. “The Prologue of the *Ordinatio*—the Principle of Individuation—it’s all here!”

And from the neighboring Dodge, Djordjevic holds a gray book out to his friend. “*The Creation of Man*—Saint Gregory of Nyssa—*The Incarnation of the Word* by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria—*The Complete Works of Origen*. The complete collection!”

The Library has arrived in the Territory, thinks Yuri, though he cannot keep his gaze fixed on it, mesmerized as he is by Judith Sevigny’s face. It has arrived safe and sound. It is perfectly whole. The mission is accomplished 100 percent—or rather, 99, he corrects himself, thinking of the man he wasn’t able to save.

I could stay under the starfire for a hundred years to save ten thousand libraries like that. But I would do the same thing to save a single Judith Sevigny. The one, the only one that exists.

Slade Vernier starts the first pickup and drives it slowly toward Djordjevic’s and the Professor’s trailer laboratory; one of the deputy sheriffs, a man called Erwin Slovak, gets into another Dodge to execute the same maneuver. Lecerf, the French sniper, smokes a marijuana cigarette as he waits for the last containers to be closed again by the soldier-monk

before taking the wheel of a third vehicle. Then Yuri realizes that Link de Nova has already left with his mother, and that Campbell is standing off to the side with Sheriff Langlois on the other side of the vast concrete esplanade. An animated discussion seems to be angering both men.

The head-on meeting of two icebergs. Something abnormal is happening. Something abnormal has *already* happened. Something abnormal is about to happen.

Campbell is a high-tension wire; he could summon the voltage necessary to power an entire city. The sheriff is the type who holds so tightly to the other end of the stick that he won't let go unless you kill him.

And nobody kills Wilbur Langlois.

Judith Seigny is so beautiful in the electric light that has just flooded the tarmac; night has fallen, and the first stars are appearing above them. So beautiful that he could fall to his knees, as if stricken by a hail of bullets in the midst of a battle in some unknown mountains.

It is unthinkable, almost unbearable, this beauty capable of bruising so deeply, of hurting so terribly. And he realizes what he has always known, especially while he was killing all those men under the cold fire of the stars in L'Amiante County: Beauty is a weapon. But not a weapon of mass destruction, at least not only that. If it can fight the Beast, it is first and foremost because it is a *weapon of singular destruction*. It destroys everything that is not *it*—that is, everything that remains subordinate to the Beast; in other words, the masses. Beauty alone knows how to ride, to domesticate, to use, to annihilate the Beast, if it must.

He will be twenty-three years old in a month and he has already killed ten men. He will be twenty-three years old in a month, and he loves Judith Seigny more than anything else in the world. It is terrifyingly simple.

Campbell walks quickly toward him from the other side of the tarmac. His eyes are glittering and his face is red.

He won't kill Wilbur Langlois. But he could, without the slightest qualm, annihilate the whole population of a city.

And Campbell wouldn't do that without a very good reason.

Paralyzed by the comprehension that is violently invading him, even as his friend approaches, eyes filled with icy rage, Yuri has time for a single thought: *Oh no. NOT THAT.*

30 > WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

“There are worse things than voluntary betrayal—namely, stupidity. There used to be military traditions in which they hardly bothered to differentiate the two. The execution squad was guaranteed in any case.”

The night is black, thinks Yuri, and it will get blacker and blacker.

That is how Chrysler begins the conversation, his eyes filled with ice. That is his verbal slap, his entry into the game, his attack on the boy, who has instinctively drawn his head into his shoulders. That is how he makes the decision to reverse the course of events, at once, definitively.

He says: “You broke rule number one. You endangered an entire plan that had been in place for two years. You have brought a huge threat down on us all. I hope you realize what you’ve done.”

He says: “Excuses don’t matter. The damage is done. Now our operations are at risk of being suspended indefinitely, which means no more little machines to make music for you, and no chance of survival now for the others. I hope you realize that, too.”

He says: “You will do *exactly* what we tell you to do. You will do *everything* we tell you to do. And you will do it without *ever* raising the slightest objection.”

And he says: “I think they’re trying to trap us. But their trap is going to close on them.”

Then he adds, in conclusion: “You will act exactly as you planned with Pluto, exactly as you just told me. You will keep quiet about the fact that the Convoy is back; if he questions you on the subject, be evasive. Say it’s somewhere in the Notre Dame Mountains. I’m not even going to tell you what we’re doing. You will be as surprised as the others. And don’t take that as a punishment—it’s for your protection, just in case.”

Link de Nova stares at his feet, his face scarlet with embarrassment and shame. Campbell will never forgive him for this mistake, obviously, but even though he knew he was breaking an ironclad rule set down by the man

from Aircrash Circle, he had sincerely believed that by helping Pluto's "clients" in their absence he was only continuing the mission. The war against the Thing.

"That's the kind of feeling that a man like Pluto knows how to play on," says Campbell. "He's almost four times your age, and he's from Junkville. You're like a minnow and he, with his inoffensive front, is the crocodile. What I'd really like to know, actually, is who he's working for. Has he told you about other possible clients besides the two young people from New Arizona and the guy from tonight?"

"He told me there was a request, yes. That we would do another operation the day after tomorrow."

The iciness in Campbell's eyes is approaching absolute zero. "He probably didn't think we'd get back so fast."

He turns to Yuri. "Let's go back to Aircrash Circle. We have to get ready for tonight."

Yuri can read the message in his gaze perfectly: *Let's get some rest, because tonight we might have to kill some more men.*

They are back in the Territory, but, even more, the Territory is back in them.

"I can't believe Link could do something so stupid," remarks Yuri.

The night is clear. Out the Airbus windows of Chrysler's cabin, he watches the furtive flight of a group of predatory birds searching for their nocturnal victims. They seem like extensions of the night itself, and of the terrible light it carries within it. Nature, even denatured, remains like the hidden model of the Territory. *We are the night birds of Grand Junction. We see by starlight, and we kill in the darkness as if it were broad daylight.*

Chrysler is carefully cleaning their guns; he kept silent all during the voyage home. His eyes are still cold, as if nothing can melt the ice in them. Nothing. Except the deaths of a few men, maybe, guilty if possible.

"Link's twelve years old," he replies. "He's a smart boy, but he isn't immune to simple trickery. It's that fucking Pluto Saint-Clair who's going to have a very bad time of it, believe me."

"And his client?"

"His client? I'll fuck him up more than you can possibly imagine."

"But what are you going to do?" asks Yuri, slightly anxiously.

Campbell's smile is the very smile of the Territory.

"That will depend on him. You know that as well as I do."

Better to let the glacial silence of the Territory night back up this statement. There is nothing more to say, any more than there would be to a group of birds of prey.

"How does the sheriff know about it?"

"One of his deputies, Erwin Slovak, followed Link de Nova one night. He left HNV County and went to one of our usual meeting points, near Lake Champlain, where Pluto was waiting for him. That's the night he healed the two boys from New Arizona. Langlois wanted to wait for our return to tell us, and do whatever is necessary about it. He did well to wait; we'll deal with this business."

"And what do we do about the two teenagers?"

"I'll see tomorrow. According to his description I'd say they're nomads, and if that's the case they've already left the Territory. That would be lucky. Lucky for them, I mean."

Yes, thinks Yuri, watching the smile—neither good nor evil—that crosses Chrysler's face. Their only chance is to have left the Territory, or to do it fast, before Campbell can find them.

Their only chance is to put as much distance as possible between them and us.

We are the Camp Doctors.

If we can't induce amnesia, we might very well move on to euthanasia.

Back to the ultraviolet sky and the artificial night of the binoculars; back to the hypernight of invisible rays. Campbell has perfectly established the strategy they will follow—one truly fit for nocturnal birds of prey, ending with them melting into the darkness below.

Whether the prey is mobile or stationary, they must contain it. Whether it is a dangerous carnivore or an inoffensive and fragile creature, they must dominate it with a single blow.

Whether it is running somewhere on a vast prairie, through the sands of a desert, or up the side of a mountain, the Territory will be laid bare—because from the sky, no place can be seen in any way other than as a flat surface for the hunter to examine.

The hunter begins in the prey's territory. The hunter begins by making it his own. The hunter remains invisible because *he has become the prey's territory*.

Okay, let's go, ultraviolet sky, black night, starfire. Back to the artificial day, the dark noon of killers.

"Concentric circles. Starting at two opposite points. We'll hide the car a kilometer to the west, far away from the main access road they will arrive by. I'll bring the camouflage tarp. Then, on foot toward our departure zone. We'll begin in the surrounding areas; two hundred, two hundred and fifty meters. You to the south, me to the north. We'll go inward, in opposing directions, so that we'll pass each other regularly, and so we can make sure nobody's hiding anywhere. We'll go over the whole area with a fine-toothed comb. Then we take our positions and we wait."

The night will be black, very black. Ultrablack. It will be their night. The Camp Doctors are back. It will be a surgical operation. One worthy of the Territory.

It is often in the most dangerous situations that harmless details hit you in the face, more forcefully than an antipersonnel mine.

For the first time since their return to the Territory, Yuri notices the mingled presence of sand and snow in indistinct masses, scattered everywhere. He remembers seeing the same thing in the areas around Heavy Metal Valley and Aircrash Circle, but at the time he paid no attention to it. He also remembers that during their departure for the Gaspé he had noticed the simultaneous arrival of an Arctic blizzard and a sandstorm coming from the Midwest. The two opposing air masses can't have collided directly above the Territory, or there would be more obvious damage. That must have happened farther east, toward New Hampshire. The storm they had encountered in the Estrie was probably born of the head-on smash between the two antinomic "supercells."

But traces are visible just the same, including in the thick woods in this part of Champlain Banks, which means that the phenomenon happened again. Which means that it *will* happen again—and this time the Territory won't be spared.

There is nothing out here. Forest. Brush. Rampant weeds and wild grasses, thistles, nettles, Canadian goldenrod, buckthorn, euphorbia, wild

mustard, *Cornus canadensis*, poison sumac, and the spiny offshoots of chaparral. The mirrorlike surface of Lake Champlain a hundred meters away. Mounds of mixed snow and sand. The varied trees of the Territory: pines, lodgepoles, beeches, acacias, cedars, maples, and palms. He fights his way through the vegetal curtain using his long Gurkha knife as a machete. He sees Campbell twenty meters away and gives him the thumbs-up; then he continues along his own path, his own circle.

He can see the slender shape of a Nordic python curled around the thick bough of a maple tree; its concentric central rings, swollen by the digestion in progress of some woodland mammal, are the only mobile part of it. Its red and yellow colors are unmistakable. Farther away, in the top branches of a red pine, he can see the virginal white of two albino macaws; the eyes of a *Strix Americanis* gleam through the foliage like two topaz disks. When he rounds an old beech tree, partially rotted where it stands, the trunk scored by ringworm and various amanitas, his movement provokes the sudden flight of a group of wood bats, who flee, shrieking with one voice, into the tops of the trees. He sees Campbell gesturing to him urgently, indicating that he should keep silent.

He is armed with his Sig Sauer and the Beretta assault rifle left to him by the soldier-monk. Campbell has opted for his U.S. Army pistol and his Winchester semiautomatic.

They circle their target, slowly, calmly, scrutinizing each square meter of terrain, searching for any suspicious trace or, more simply, for other men.

Neither Yuri nor Chrysler finds anything suspect, or any other men.

They quickly take up their posts to wait for the people they came for.

The night is blacker than ever. A perfect night for birds of prey.

Then everything is so simple, so quick, so clean.

As binary as an electric switch. On/off.

Before/after.

Certainty/doubt.

Trust/fear.

Life/death.

Standing. On your knees.

Talking, full of life, because hope is finally within your grasp. Obligated to shut up, the barrel of a gun pressed against your temple, knowing that all

hope has just been destroyed.

On/off. Digital. Like the black night and the ultraviolet sky.

“You, Pluto,” says Yuri. “I advise you to stay very calm, place your hands on your head, and get down on your knees like your friend just did. You, Link, stay seated on the hood of your quad; please don’t move. You are not part of this situation.”

And Campbell adds to the man who raises his hands slowly to the back of his neck: “You will be the first one.”

Campbell knows the entire language of fear. The man instinctively bows his head, squares his shoulders, clenches his fingers until the knuckles turn white.

Chrysler allows a few seconds for the nail to be hammered into the coffin, then says:

“You will be the first one to answer some questions.”

He places the barrel of his Winchester lightly on the back of the man’s neck.

“My patience tends to run out pretty fast. When I’ve asked a question for the second time, that’s generally the limit. And when my patience has reached its limit, my finger presses on the first metal object within its reach. So I’m going to ask you some questions, and you would do well to answer them the first time, because if you don’t I guarantee that one of my twelve cartridges will prevent you from being buried with your head, which will have disappeared like a watermelon in a wood chipper. Do you understand me, *hombre?*”

The man turns toward Campbell slightly, just enough to say, nodding his head, “Yes, I understand.”

And Yuri feels his heart lurch violently as he recognizes the man.

Campbell begins the interrogation, but Yuri is no longer listening; he can’t hear anymore; he has shifted to another channel of reality. The channel of consequences and causes. The channel of potential catastrophes.

Until now, the situation was serious. It has now become a true disaster.

Yuri stares into Pluto’s eyes and sees fear in them. He answers with an expression of pure disdain. Then he coldly informs Chrysler that the situation is much worse than they imagined.

Chrysler glances at him frostily. “By ‘situation,’ I assume you mean this man.”

Yuri takes a deep breath. It is up to him, now, to announce the imminent arrival of the cataclysm.

“Yes. It’s him. The man in the Buick.”

Now the ultraviolet night has fallen on everything, isolating this small piece of the Territory from the rest of humanity.

The fire of the stars shines for each of them, and for each it has reserved its own particular combustion.

“Bravo, Pluto. You really know how to behave. This is the man with the red Buick, a piece of shit from Little Congo, the guy who’s been following us for weeks. Thanks to you and your delusions of personal grandeur, he has found us. You’re nothing but a worthless bastard; you let yourself be manipulated like a little girl. But I’ll deal with you later.”

The language of fear. That language that writes itself in the body. Yuri reads the alphabet in Pluto’s face, and in his smallest movements—reflexes, expressions. Down to the pallid color of his face, shiny with cold sweat.

Campbell turns back to the man at whom his weapon is pointing.

“You must see, Mr. Vegas Orlando, that now we’re going to have to resume our little interview from a slightly different angle.”

And he strikes the man a violent blow to the side of the head with the butt of his gun. Yuri can see the blood trickling in fine bluish lines through his binoculars.

The night is very, very black. The night is interrogatory black. It is a dungeon of a night. An ultrablack night.

A lake, underbrush, a dusty road, the sky and the stars. Four men, one boy. Two men armed; two men on their knees. The boy is just an observer of the whole thing.

The night is interrogatory black, Gestapo black, NKVD black, CIA black. It is the pirated recording, the clandestine listening station, the secret file. It is Chrysler Campbell and James Vegas Orlando. And Madam Winchester SX3, who has just placed a cold kiss on the neck of the man on his knees.

It is the night that speaks:

“Very well; we’ll start over from the beginning. Start with your first contact with Pluto Saint-Clair—and don’t try to feed me any bullshit about

meeting in Vortex Townships. I've filled whole cemeteries with jokers like you."

The silence of the night, a few instants too long.

"I would prefer not to have to ask you again. I think you've understood me."

"I've been using him as a spy."

"Yes, like you spied on all of us in Carbon City. Why Pluto?"

"You—we couldn't pin you down, and we wanted to move faster. One night, I was able to follow Pluto here and I saw the trade they were running—the boy on the quad bike and the two teenagers from New Arizona. I saw guitars."

Campbell looks at Link de Nova, sitting on his Suzuki in front of two long black-and-tawny electric guitars lying side by side on the still rain-wet earth, like offerings.

"I understand. So you followed Pluto and you saw the trade. But your words have given you away; you said 'we.' You've said it more than once, so it isn't just a slip of the tongue. Who is 'we'?"

A few seconds of silence, but this time the man starts speaking again just before Campbell can remind him—with the butt of his gun—of the rules of the game.

"I hired some guys to flesh out the investigation, but they didn't turn up anything on you, so we concentrated our research on Pluto Saint-Clair."

Yuri and Campbell exchange a glance full of the Territory's secrets. The men on Row 299. Vegas Orlando's little soldiers. He doesn't seem to know that they're dead, that Yuri wiped them out.

In fact, he doesn't seem to know a lot of things. But there is at least one thing he does know.

The most important thing.

"Okay. Very interesting. You're rising in our estimation, Mr. Orlando. Now I'm going to ask you a crucial question, and it will not tolerate the slightest bending of the rules I've laid out for you. Understood?"

"Understood perfectly."

"Excellent. Who are you working for?"

The seconds are stars whose fire shines in the night.

This time, the standard delay is exceeded by a great deal.

"I'm going to be nice and ask the question a second time without killing you first. Now, who are you working for?"

“I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about; I swear.”

“Too bad.”

The ultraviolet night has fallen on this part of the Territory, and the ultra-black night is Campbell’s friend. It is very simple, very fast, very clean.

The butt of the gun hits the man’s other cheek, hard. He gives a groan of pain and falls heavily on his side, then gets shakily back up on his knees, prodded by the pressure of the Winchester’s barrel. Again, thin geysers of bluish blood spurt in Yuri’s binoculars.

“Don’t mistake me for a fool, Mr. Orlando. I know you by name; I know you wouldn’t have the means to conduct a wide-scale search in the Territory, or even in Junkville. Someone has to be helping you. And I want to know the name of your ... associate.”

A moment of silence, shot through with vibrations that could contain an eternity.

“I ... if ... if I tell you, will you let me live?”

The man gasps like an animal being tracked by a nocturnal predator. He’s right, thinks Yuri; it would be better if he knew how to run very fast, with Campbell at his heels.

The night is ultrablack. The time to make a deal with death has come. The moment of truth—the moment of betrayal.

“How can I know you’re telling the truth, for starters?”

“I ... I’ll give you all the details ... listen, I’ll tell you everything, and I’ll get out of the Territory within forty-eight hours. Anyway, my life won’t be worth a drop of gasoline once I tell you his name.”

“Your life is already pretty far down on the list. You’d better decide.”

And Campbell gently presses the barrel of his gun into the man’s neck. It is as if he has heaved a sigh of impatience mingled with resignation. Yes, the night is surely interrogatory black.

“They say the exception proves the rule. For the third and very last time, who are you working for? You have three seconds before I pulverize your head. One ... two ...”

“I ... I work for a man from Little Congo.”

“Good; you know how to count to three. Who is this man? Another pimp? What is his name?”

“He isn’t a pimp. He’s a surgeon, an autotransformist, a refugee from Neon Park.”

Yuri remembers the deluxe mobile home at the top of the butte, near which the red Buick had been parked on that day. A former resident of Neon Park; a bionician. Undoubtedly one of the very last in the Territory. A man who would know how to profit from his knowledge. It makes sense.

“A surgeon?”

“Yes, a specialist in body tuning. He worked on the strip in Monolith Hills as a whore before he moved to Neon Park. He’s androgynous.”

Yuri knows the man has decided that if he is to betray, then he might as well betray everything, do anything to save his own skin, give as much information as he can.

“His name?” asks Campbell again.

“He’s very discreet. He can repair some biosystems—not as well as the boy here, but he implanted a nanogenerator in me that has worked for a month now.”

“And you told yourself you could get something even better. I understand.”

Suddenly, Yuri knows that the same flash of understanding is coursing through his and Campbell’s consciousnesses. The ultraviolet night is their Grand Junction.

“A moment. Pay attention now. Did you plan a meeting between your associate and Pluto, and the one we’ll call ‘the boy’?”

A very brief moment of black night, of silent interrogatory night.

“Yes. Day after tomorrow. I asked Pluto to arrange another contact as soon as possible, for a friend in need, I told him. He told me we had to do it before you got back, so we set the date.”

Campbell looks at Pluto Saint-Clair. The cold light in his eyes almost matches that of the starfire.

“What else did he say about us?”

“Nothing much, except that you were the boy’s bodyguards.”

“And your ‘associate’; what does he know about us?”

“Almost nothing. That’s why we were looking all over the Territory for information about you, and why my ‘associate,’ as you call him, wanted to get a meeting by saying it was urgent.”

“But it wasn’t urgent?”

“Listen, I don’t know exactly what he was planning. He always keeps the details of his plans secret.”

“Plans? What plans?”

“He wanted to be immunized, but afterward he had planned a surprise attack. He asked me to scope out the site.”

“A surprise attack? I’d very much like to hear more about this, and fast. I love stories about situation rooms.”

“I think—but he didn’t tell me to the letter, okay?—I think he wanted to have himself immunized, and then immediately afterward kidnap Pluto Saint-Clair and the boy.”

A betrayal for a betrayal, thinks Yuri, watching Pluto’s face whiten as if his entire body has been emptied of blood. Yes, old man, that’s how it is. You were in the process of getting yourself fucked over royally.

Campbell simply shoots a frozen glance at the man from Midnight Oil, the man who was their informant, and who informed others about them.

“He wanted to kidnap Pluto and the boy, I understand very well. What did he want, to make the boy work for him and use Pluto as an adviser?”

“I don’t know. But he was thinking farther along than that.”

“Farther than what? And, let me remind you, you still haven’t told me his name.”

“Farther than the boy. He thinks the boy is acting under the influence of another man.”

“Another man?”

“Yeah. A professor. A man from Texas. The one you went to find on BlackSky Ridge. He wanted to make this professor work for him in exchange for his hostages’ lives. He told me one night that he was going to send him Pluto Saint-Clair’s head to show him he wasn’t kidding around.”

Yuri almost laughs at the sight of their erstwhile informant’s crumpled face. He grins at him, but his eyes are full of the same ice as Chrysler Campbell’s.

“His name. Now. Immediately. I think I’m light-years beyond my natural limits.”

The response bursts forth without an instant of hesitation. “Silverskin. He’s called Jade Silverskin. Let me live; I won’t say anything to anyone, and I’ll leave the Territory. ...”

The man has conducted his betrayal well. He delivered the crucial information at the end, but he proved his goodwill by telling a coherent, simple story, all the details of which fit together perfectly.

Chrysler Campbell is silent. The ultrablack night is on his side. His brain analyzes all the data, all the parameters. He draws diagrams, he compiles

programs, he calculates. Seconds of silence go by like photons in the ultrablack night.

The man on his knees does not speak. Chrysler Campbell does not speak. Yuri does not speak. Neither Pluto nor Link de Nova has said a word.

The ultrablack night is the night of hunters, the night of birds of prey. Campbell calculates. He *computes*. He establishes correspondences, consequences, inferences, incidences; he creates a grammar of the night, there, at the very moment Yuri is watching him, his gun pointed at the neck of the man on his knees on the damp ground.

Campbell is silent. The man is silent. Between them stretches the silence of the ultrablack night, the alpha-and-omega night, the night when all the lights are revealing themselves. Campbell is silent. The man is silent. The black interrogatory night has stopped its chorus, silencing all the voices.

All except one.

Campbell is silent. The man is silent. Yuri is silent. Pluto is silent. Link is silent.

The one who speaks, suddenly, raising the voice of the interrogatory night one more time, is Madam Winchester.

She causes the head of James Vegas Orlando to explode, like a large, ripe fruit, just as Campbell said it would. A violent scarlet efflorescence takes the place of the man's skull. His body falls forward in a single motion, crumpling onto a carpet of catchfly and red *Cornus* spotted with snowflakes and grains of sand.

"You won't say anything, but you won't leave the Territory, either," says Campbell simply, in a macabre version of a funeral oration.

The night is ultrared.

The man cheated. He cheated well; very well, even. His betrayal held inestimable value because it contained all the light of the truth.

And the truth is that he knew too much to stay alive, knew too many people to stay alive, and he could say too much about them to stay alive. And he had run up against the wrong people, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, to stay alive.

The Law of the Territory is intractable when it comes to these types of questions of *savoir-vivre*.

The gun blast has sealed the terminal silence of the night. Pluto Saint-Clair's head is lowered; Yuri can see the ceaseless trembling of his form.

The night has penetrated him; the language of fear has taken possession of his body.

The boy sitting on his quad bike isn't talking, either, but on his face Yuri can see a feeling other than simple, banal human terror. It is more a sort of fascinated curiosity, as if he isn't really there, as if an infinite distance separates him from what is happening.

He is in the process of learning what humanity really is. It is as captivating as the quantum ballet of quarks or the building of an anthill.

The man with the red Buick is dead. Night reigns over the Territory. The night is their Territory.

So the ultrablack night, the interrogatory night, has taken things into its own hands. It commands, it orders, it obliges.

It is the greatest freedom in this poor world. It is a process that unfolds without the slightest discontinuity, not even that of death, which it turns into a simple comma, a pause, a sigh, between two barely distinct movements.

Phase one: Campbell turns to the kneeling Pluto Saint-Clair, glancing briefly at Yuri, who is still pointing his assault rifle at the man. Yuri will not falter. He has become a guardian of the Territory in his turn, a starfire killer, a hunter in the ultrablack night, a man of the Law of Bronze. The Winchester emits a last belch of powder. Pluto dips his head further, hunches his shoulders, his whole body shaking violently.

"Don't kill me, please ..." he begs brokenly.

"Can you give me a good reason why I shouldn't, Pluto?"

The silence of the night, the fire of the stars, humanity as an experience of death.

Pluto does not speak. The Winchester seems more talkative.

Phase two: Campbell looks at Yuri; Yuri looks at Campbell. They have no need to say anything; the night speaks for them, whispering in their ears. The Law of the Territory has synchronized them perfectly.

Campbell heaves a long sigh of resignation.

He lets the barrel of his rifle droop toward the ground. The night is far beyond black.

"Shoot him," he says very simply to Yuri.

Phase three: Pluto has no time to react. At the most, an indistinct noise sounds deep in his throat.

Yuri has stowed his rifle in a bandolier slung over his shoulder. The tube of anodized metal is an extension of his hand, and it is quickly pointed in

the direction of Pluto Saint-Clair's exposed neck.

The ultrablack night is hypodermic silence. The syringe emits only a weak hiss when it is propelled from the injection gun to land cleanly, burying its needle in flesh. Pluto turns his head and stares blearily at Yuri, his eyes already glassy; he holds out his hand in a slightly absurd gesture, as if trying to grasp hold of something.

But there is nothing to grasp here.

Nothing but the ultrablack night. The night into which you are about to sink, thinks Yuri.

And count yourself lucky. For you, there will be a morning.

Phase four: Division of labor, dispatch of the black night, secret organization under the starfire. Not a word is exchanged. Everyone knows his task. The silence is their Territory.

For Pluto there will be a morning; Campbell is taking care of him now. The injection Yuri gave him was a simple narcoleptic. Now specialized amnesia must be induced. Chrysler creates a complete neurological map of Pluto Saint-Clair's brain. Yuri knows he will make up his programmable scopolamine tonight in his cabin at Aircrash Circle, and that when Pluto wakes up in his own home a day or two from now, he will remember nothing. Absolutely nothing. Except what Campbell allows to remain in his memory. His body will live. But his brain will be partially dead.

It is the Law of the Territory.

Phase five: Now they must deal with the problem of Vegas Orlando, the night's troublesome issue. They must deal with the problem of his corpse.

There is a body. There are trash bags, adhesive tape, and some twine brought with them in their backpacks. Campbell's intuitions are certainties planned for in advance.

There is a body. And there is a lake.

The equation is childishly simple. The child of the ultrablack night.

The dock is a bit rotted, its disjointed planks letting a few pieces of putrefied wood float on the surface of the water. Yuri walks toward the quicksilver lake. He knows he is walking on the wild side of the night; he knows he is walking toward the starfire itself; he knows that this time he has really gone over to the other side.

The most serious murder isn't necessarily the one you commit yourself. And especially, during a murder, the most crucial act isn't necessarily the inducement of death itself.

At the very end of the dock, chained to an iron ring by a rusty mooring, a rowboat floats with difficulty on top of the waves. Its floor is moldy, full of holes, splintered, and covered with puddles of stagnant water; it is kept above the surface of the water only by virtue of the cord attaching it to the small dock. The night is made for them. The ultrablack night of killers. The night of the Camp Doctors.

Phase six: The night of the Territory loves to facilitate the actions of its soldiers. Everything goes very fast on both sides. Pluto is connected to a neurosensor pack. The numbers and lines of code scroll past on the screen of the night. Vegas Orlando is dragged to the dock, tightly wrapped with swaths of adhesive tape and nylon cord in two huge industrial garbage bags from Big Bag Recyclo into which Yuri has placed large stones gathered from the side of the road, then placed into the rowboat, which wavers heavily under its new load. A well-aimed slash of the mooring. A single shove with a half-rotted oar serves to push the boat as far as possible from the dock into the middle of the lake. A dozen meters at most, and it falls apart and founders. Yuri can't even see the garbage-bag bundle as it sinks to the bottom of the lake.

The ultrablack night watches over the Territory and its guardians. The disappearance is obligated to remain invisible.

Yuri goes to get the pickup. Campbell carefully watches the numbers scrolling across the screen of the biopack monitoring the metabolism of Pluto Saint-Clair.

He raises his eyes to the boy, still sitting on the front of his bike, still silent, still unmoving in front of the two electric guitars laid side by side on the carpet of moss. All around them, the moon and the stars shed their rays of cool light on the coating of snow lightly burying the piles of sand.

All around them is the Law of Bronze, the Law of the Night, the Law of the Territory.

The Law of Men.

"I could have told you to go home, to keep you from seeing this. I even thought of it."

The silence of the night. This time, the boy is part of it, too. He is free. He is free to let the ultrablack night speak for him.

"Then I told myself it would be unfair. Yes, unfair. Because it would have meant breaking the pact that unites us, if we had kept you from knowing."

Link asks no questions. He is the night. He is silence. He is the secret.

But Campbell is going to tell him everything; he is the Guardian of the Night, the mercenary of silence, the hired starfire killer.

“Because you need to know. You need to know this isn’t a game—that it’s bigger than that, and supremely dangerous. You need to know that the world is at war against itself, and you need to know what the word war means, especially on this scale. You need to know that no mistake can be let slide. You need to know that we will kill anyone who tries to find out our secret, that we will kill anyone who tries to get near the Professor or your father, not to mention you. You need to know that we’ll protect you against your will if we have to. You need to know that we’ll protect you from yourself with the same rigor we’ll defend you from a Vegas Orlando or a Pluto Saint-Clair. You need to know that the Thing is much stronger than we are, and above all you need to know that most men are a lot weaker than us. You need to know that we will give no quarter. You need to know the price of silence, and the exact cost of the slightest word—especially a word too many. You need to recognize fear in a man’s eyes. You need to recognize death in a man’s eyes. You need to know what the impact of a bullet fired at close range does to a man’s head. You need to know the difference between a living body at instant T and the same body, dead, at instant T plus one. You need to know some simple mathematics of the night. That will help you avoid other errors in calculation.”

A human computer like Campbell is probably the best weapon to have in a fight against the digitalization of man, thinks Link de Nova.

Campbell is a friend of numbers.

Campbell is a friend of the night.

Campbell is his friend.

In a way, it is utterly terrifying.

31 > *ARE FRIENDS ELECTRIC?*

The sun is high in the sky when Link de Nova wakes up, slightly nauseated. A fine ray of light falls directly onto his bed through the window above it. It seems to be made of the orange radiance contained in shadows. He hardly slept, just in fits of an hour or two, but the image of the man's head exploding in the dim light of the starlit night kept repeating itself in his dreams like a film played on continuous loop by the Devil himself. The icy eyes of Chrysler Campbell, his weapon that had ended the conversation with a brief orange burst. The incredible calm of Yuri McCoy, who had made the body disappear as if he were dealing with common biodegradable trash. Barely visible elements, but ones that formed the skeleton of the nightmare, just as the night was the setting for murder.

Yuri and Chrysler are his friends. His best friends. His only friends in the Territory, in fact. They are his only friends, his "bodyguards." They are his killers.

They would be capable of exterminating the entire population of the Territory to protect him, and also undoubtedly capable of doing much more than that.

As he slowly prepares to face this new day in the Post-World, Link sees, more clearly than he ever has before, that he is the sole keeper of a secret that is worth the lives of millions of men, because he could probably save at least that many. He sees that he is treading a fine line between life and death. He sees that he, himself, is a frontier between two "territories," and that he is the map of them both. He sees that he is Mankind's shield against the arrows shot by the Thing. But the Thing is in some way the future of Mankind. Or, rather, the monstrous *hubris* between its past and its future, an eternal present of living death.

He is the Shield of Bronze of the Territory. Unlike Sheriff Langlois and his friends Yuri and Campbell, he is not in the service of the Law; even

thinking of it makes him nearly faint with terror. It is the Law that is in his service.

It is the Law that would kill for him; it is the Law that would kill men to help him continue healing other men.

He wanders around the outside of his trailer for a few minutes. The sky is hugely blue. The sun is brilliantly yellow. The metal is fiery. The World is stupefyingly beautiful, especially because it has ended—or nearly so.

He brought up the subject one night with his mother, while his father worked late with the Professor in their trailer laboratory.

You might say that the Created World persists in showing through the Post-World that has succeeded it, he had said. What do you mean by that, his mother had asked. Beauty resists, he had said. Yuri McCoy thinks like I do; he told me when they got back. And what does he know of beauty, his mother had asked, coldly.

Yuri is a young killer, a young Territory hunter of the night, but that is not his primary vocation, of that Link is sure. The Metastructure imploded ten years ago, and eleven years ago his parents died, and Chrysler Campbell took him under his wing, like a self-appointed older brother. Neither Yuri nor Campbell is a bad man by nature.

Which is what makes them even more dangerous. Which is what makes them even more pitiless. Which is what permits them to distinguish so well between Beauty and the Beast. They are at an equal distance from both of them.

So it was with a barely discernible note of defiance in his voice that he had said to his mother:

“What Yuri knows of Beauty, he learned from his fight against the Beast.”

The song is called “We Love You,” and it was sent to us from the Ring. It says that we are loved, that we are not alone, that Beauty still exists.

It has been playing continuously for more than ten days now, twenty-four hours a day, in Judith’s little observatory.

Judith. She is there, standing in front of him, but he *is not standing* in front of her; nothing in him seems capable of standing; it is as if he is falling down on the inside; it is like a serious accident; it is as if he is in a

gaseous state. It gets worse every time; the next time, there will probably be nothing left of him.

Judith's face is full of excitement, fascination, impatience; she looks almost childlike, full of hope. "Link, you'll never guess!"

"Guess what, Judith?"

"The men in the Ring. I got a message this morning, right after I woke up!"

"Did they tell you to have a nice day?"

Despite himself, his tone contains a note of irony that the young woman doesn't miss.

"Idiot. Why are you acting like you don't care?"

Judith, almost angry. Judith, raven-haired ice. Why so emotional?

I do care, Judith, he thinks, but some things have happened recently that are keeping my little brain too busy for anything else.

"What's going on?" he asks, actually quite curious to know what has made Judith Seigny so excited.

The young woman's face is glowing with ecstasy; she could light up all of HNV at night, thinks Link.

"They're coming," she says calmly. "I've told my parents and the sheriff already."

"They're coming?"

"Yes. They're going to leave the Ring in exactly three days, depending on atmospheric conditions. They say that they should land somewhere in the Territory five or six hours later."

"Somewhere in the Territory? I hope they're joking."

"What do you mean?"

Link heaves a deep sigh. Judith is unaware of so many things about the Territory, its Law, the people that make sure that Law is obeyed, people she does not respect.

"The Territory is a jungle, Judith. If they land in the wrong spot, their capsule will break into pieces, and the same thing will happen to them. The Junkville Triads will hit the jackpot."

"But ... but what should they do, then?"

"Be more precise in their approach maneuvers. They'll have to land in HNV."

"HNV? Right here?"

“Yes, and the best place would be—guess? It would be the cosmodrome itself.”

“The cosmodrome? But that hasn’t functioned for twelve years.”

“There is no cosmodrome in Junkville or in Grand Funk Railroad, but there are plenty of slave merchants and technology traffickers in both places. I’m not saying the cosmodrome will be operational, just that they have to land there. You should send them that message, with the precise GPS coordinates.”

Judith looks at Link de Nova intensely. He avoids her piercing violet gaze, concentrating instead on the landscape outside the vast glass windows of the veranda. Metal, light, Plexiglas.

“What else did they say?” he asks after a moment.

“You won’t believe it. It’s ... incredible.”

“That’s a tautological statement, I’d say. What am I not going to believe?”

“The people from the Ring, the ones that want to land in the Territory ...”

“Yes?”

“They aren’t men.”

A second of silence.

“So they’re women?”

A crystalline laugh, as cutting as diamond dust.

“There will be one woman, in fact. There are two people in total.”

“So, a man and a woman?”

“No.”

“No? You just told me that—”

“I just told you they aren’t humans, Link. They’re androids.”

He manages to keep his eyes on Judith’s face for a few seconds.

A few seconds. A few consecutive lives.

The fundamental difference between Truth and Beauty lies in the fact that the former is a secret and the second is a mystery.

When they meet, a world and everyone in it can be swallowed up.

Not to mention a man.

Even less a boy of twelve years.

And two millennia too old.

He couldn't say exactly when the idea occurred to him for the first time. After his last visit to the Hotel Laika, obviously, but it has coalesced since then into a block of pure evidence, with more piling up in sharp fragments every second.

The evidence has come from some observations and the intuition that guides him, intuition whose source he does not know, but whose intensity he does.

Realizations: the aqualung under the dome was built for a human being, but one of small size; it could be modified slightly, of course, but everything points to the fact that it was fundamentally designed as an exoform for a child or an adolescent.

Like him.

But not like Pluto and his six feet of height.

So Pluto has been trying to observe from the outside what happens in the numeric interface to which the exoform is still connected.

It's logical. He would do the same thing.

If he was Pluto Saint-Clair.

And if he was six feet tall.

He needs to be sure that the cyberdog won't follow him. He will have to avoid the sheriff's patrols and now, as far as he knows, the necro Triads marauding on the strip.

He hardly knows how he will proceed, and he doesn't know why at all.

Something is pushing him to do it; something is absolutely determined that he will do it.

The problem, and he is excruciatingly aware of it, is that the "something" might well be the Thing itself.

The evidence is piling up even more forcefully. He has to face the danger. He has powers that can counter its own, at least in some ways. He senses that the aqualung in the Hotel Laika is a key that will open the door to the entity's vital center.

He will have to be careful and well prepared. There is the Library, which might help him to better understand what he must confront. And he has his two friends, the two bounty hunters from the south of the Territory, the two men that dance with the night.

Then, one day, when the time is right, he will enter into the interface with the Thing, with the Post-Metastructure, with what has left a fossil trace of its disappearance under the dome of the Hotel Laika.

He will enter into direct contact with the Enemy.

Yuri looks for a few instants at the old woman who has just opened the metal-plated door of her old apartment on the strip.

Joanna Marquette, Wilbur Langlois' informant in Monolith Hills. She is neither a former prostitute nor a junkie nor a dealer nor a hired killer nor a Triad informer. She is just a former cosmodrome programmer; she has lived in the city of Grand Junction almost since its foundation, having come from Canada with her parents when she was two or three years old. She knows the city down to the square meter, and she can identify every one of the faces that make up its population.

And what she has to tell them will give them a glimpse of difficult days to come for the whole Territory.

It was Campbell who found her message on a digital answering machine that Link de Nova had repaired and Chrysler had connected to his shortwave radio transmitter-receiver.

They are sharing the work: while Campbell deals with Pluto Saint-Clair's neural deprogramming, Yuri has come to Monolith Hills to get the necessary information.

The teenagers from New Arizona had been abruptly shoved into the background, but Yuri knows that for Campbell, the background is what determines the foreground. He would not risk forgetting them. They had better leave the Territory very soon, if they don't want to suffer the same fate as the man with the red Buick.

"Madam Marquette," says Yuri simply, entering the apartment—which is better protected than a military base from the time when such things still existed.

"Take a seat, Yuri. I'm making tea. I'll be with you in two minutes."

The two minutes seem like hours to him, but he feigns insouciance.

The old woman sits down across from him. The Chinese porcelain teapot between them sends gray-white scrolls of steam into the air. She waits a moment. She smiles and glances briefly at Yuri. Then she serves them both. Yuri notices the magnificent silver platter on which the steaming cups are

placed. Joanna Marquette has a lot of valuable possessions. She doesn't just barricade her apartment like a strongbox, Yuri knows; she also carries a small .22-caliber Browning pistol permanently on her person, and under her bed is an old double-barreled hunting rifle, loaded and ready for immediate use. They say that before the Fall, she cleanly blew the head off one of two thieves who tried to force her lock.

She is not a professional killer, which makes her even more unpredictable.

Yuri knows the ritual; it is extremely simple. All he has to do is ask the right questions.

"In your message, you said the phenomenon is growing on the strip. Could you begin by defining the nature of this so-called phenomenon?"

The old woman smiles; her false teeth, still perfectly implanted and immaculately white, appear like an ivory fan.

"The phenomenon you've been dealing with since the end of last year, you and your friend from Aircrash Circle."

Since the end of last year. It is clear, clean, precise. She is talking about

—
"The numeric devolution?"

"Call it what you want. In around a week, more than a hundred cases have appeared on the strip. They say there are almost as many in the northern part of the city, near the cosmodrome, and the same goes for the aerogare colonies. A friend told me the phenomenon has spread to Grand Funk Railroad and the American emigrants there, south of Junkville."

Well, thinks Yuri. It's really begun now. The whole Territory is affected. Things are on a whole new level.

"People are dying every day," she says. "And new cases are constantly appearing."

There is no point in telling Yuri this; he knows it already. Yuri is a Camp Doctor.

Yuri is a man who knows perfectly well just how powerless they are.

Between the moment they left and the moment they came back, the Thing launched an all-out offensive. The time when they could fight the early effects of the numeric devolution has ended before it really began. The time when Link de Nova managed to find a solution, and that the Thing saw only

as a preliminary phase, is over, and they must move on to a wide-scale plan, larger than life, on the scale of the entire human population. The Thing has always acted like this; in that, it is the perfect inverted version of the Metastructure, putting double-or triple-repeating systems in place, proceeding with tests and pretests and posttests. *Updates*. More than the Metastructure ever was, it is a World. It has created a sort of *cryptotechnology* that perfectly imitates cybernetic or bionic systems, but only according to a paradoxically inverted paradigm that destroys them as it imposes their own numerical logic.

Yuri makes a tour of the strip. It is true; the situation has radically changed in the space of a few weeks, since the time they came to the Hotel Laika with Link de Nova.

All the Junkville Triads are milling around the long, dilapidated boulevard, its side streets, and the rows that link them to the city of Grand Junction in the west or to some semibarren township on the banks of Lake Champlain.

The various necro uniforms, the whole medicolegal outfit, the refrigeration kits.

Some of them are randomly searching; others are heading purposefully toward houses or shelters or motel rooms or apartments pinpointed by one or another of their informants.

Business is booming. Yuri can see stretchers, vans, and body bags; pick out the characteristic colors of various uniforms; recognize logos. Several times he passes men in the middle of the boulevard itself babbling endless sequences of binary numbers or speaking with pulverized grammar; there are bodies on the sidewalks, around which groups of necrorecyclers are gathering with the calm celerity of insects programmed for the task. He realizes that this is a sort of repeat of the Second Fall of 2063, with its systematic attack on bionic implants; he speaks for a few moments with a member of a Clockwork Orange Triad, who tells him that for the last ten days or so, the few thousand survivors whose bionic systems had previously remained resistant have been in great danger.

Yuri stops in Von Braun Heights. From there he can see the whole city and the cosmodrome, buried in sand and populated only by errant tumbleweeds. The statue of the father of Saturn V stands near him, a monument in bronze erected to the stars at a time when people still believed mankind had a destiny.

The Thing loves the idea of man having a destiny.
That allows it to present itself as the only one possible, now.

Campbell is truly the man of Numbers. The man of Calculations. The man of the Night. The man of the Digital Night.

When Yuri gets back to Aircrash Circle everything is tidy, impeccable, orderly. It's *clean*, his friend informs him.

He programmed the metascopolamine and injected it into Pluto Saint-Clair's pituitary gland. Then he called a trusted informant on Black-Sky Ridge to make sure that Midnight Oil wasn't under surveillance, and took Pluto back to his home.

"For the final phase I programmed a classic sequence with the continuous removal of his short-term memory. He could walk to the door and open it, get to the couch, lie down and wait for the end of the routine; then I came back here. I took every imaginable precaution and I'm sure I wasn't followed. And you?"

Yuri gives a simple rundown of the situation. "Almost five hundred people have been contaminated in Grand Junction in the space of a week. Dozens of new cases in New Arizona, same for Grand Funk Railroad. The numeric devolution acts exactly like it did with the '63 mutation—a random period of onset and then a disciplined attack on large numbers of people. The Triads are going nuts. The epidemic has reached new heights in Junkville during the last two or three days. A guy from Clockwork Orange confirmed it."

Campbell is the man of Numbers. He calculates. He "computes." He creates diagrams, reports, lists.

"Do you see the progression?"

"The progression?"

"The mathematical progression. The numeric devolution starts in October, as with every 'Fall.' First month, around 0.01 percent of the Territory's population is affected; that's thirty people. Second month, 0.02 percent; around sixty. That's when the rumors start and people begin hearing whispers about the phenomenon. Third month, it doubles again, except that the effect is cumulative and these numbers are added to each other, and it really is like it was in 2063, with a specific dynamic. In mid-February, it visibly decided to double the rhythm again and I bet it will do

the same thing in a month, and again the following month. It's the progression of the progression. A *phase*. It will have contaminated more than one out of every ten people during the summer, and around half its human livestock in the anniversary month of October. It's very precise, very well planned."

Campbell knows what he's talking about. He is the man of Numbers, the man of calculations, the man of plans.

"It's also attacking bionic systems again."

"Logic, Yuri. It's also trying to get to the simplest electrical machines, as Professor Zarkovsky says. Each of the 'Beasts' is a phase of the Thing. They don't happen in a linear sense; they transfigure within one another so that they can eventually form this metastable synthesis, this anti-Metastructure."

"Yes, and you don't find it strange?"

"The real question is, what *isn't* strange in this world that is becoming more and more foreign to us?"

"I'm talking about what the Professor explained to us about the terms *anti* and *ante*. The thing is an *ante*-Metastructure in that it is turning the world back to before the birth of the Metastructure, and farther back even than that, yet it is coming 'afterward'; so that also makes it the Post-Metastructure. It is also its inverted image, 'anti,' but with all the same dynamics. It is before and after at the same time; 'anti'—opposite—and identical at once. Don't you find that odd?"

"There's another strange numeric coincidence. Zarkovsky told us that the technical birth date of the Metastructure was April 4, 2027, and it was on the anniversary of that date that the update work began. But we also know that the First Fall happened on October 4, 2057, or thirty years and six months after the birth."

"So?"

"The thirty years probably don't matter; what counts is that it's exactly six months between April 4 and October 4. Another six. That's probably what you missed last time we talked about this."

Luminous shapes are forming in Yuri's head.

He does not know if Campbell is right, but intuition is hitting him with its usual violence: The famous "666" of the Devil probably corresponds to a singular operation; even worse, is He initiating an infinite series of sixes?

Does it even, maybe, indicate the presence of a group of very specific numbers whose existence they are still unaware of?

Does each six really correspond to a Fall? Is this number a true key to understanding or a simple esoteric diversion?

He realizes that it really doesn't matter. What counts is that the Thing is acting as if it believes it itself.

Yes, it is acting as if it needs to believe in at least one "thing." One *single thing*.

It needs to believe in itself.

And, even more, it needs *someone* to believe in it.

32 > *THE MAN MACHINE*

With micromechanical attention to detail, stretched out on the early-twentieth-century-style couch, legs bent at a right angle to his waist, he is planting tiny biophosphorescent darts with patience and regularity into an anodized metal matrix resting on a delicate pillow whose crushed velvet is covered with pearl-encrusted silk embroidery, quartz crystals, natural amber beads, and mother-of-pearl sequins. The still-trembling light of the early morning glimmers on the antique gems, the plasma screen, and the hard angles of aerospace aluminum.

He has hardly spared a glance for the three detectives he hired to fill in for James Vegas Orlando—and to find him.

One of them is named Johnson Belfond; he was recommended by a nasty pimp from Little Congo. His two colleagues are a woman from Junkville, a husky redhead with short, curly hair named Lucie “Wanda” Walker, a professional killer who started her adult life as a gladiatrix in the arenas of Monolith Hills; and an Asian man, a Korean American Belfond found in New Arizona called Lee Kwan Osborne, a former military medic. He was, they say, a specialist in various poisons. “*Belfond is a son of a bitch,*” the Little Congo pimp had said when he recommended the man. “*He has a bunch of freelance regulars that work for him depending on the situation. He’s honest with his associates; he never cheats, so no complications. And he’s absolutely pitiless with the men he hunts down. He used to be a cop, but he spent his weekends as a hired killer for some confederation of criminal bikers. He was arrested two or three years before the Fall but got out quickly, and it didn’t take him long to find work in Junkville.*”

“*I think you’ve just given me an exact description of the man I’m looking for,*” Silverskin had cheerfully told the procurer.

* * *

And now he is waiting for the son of a bitch Belfond to give him a detailed report. The anodized matrix emits a brief red light, indicating that he has lost again. This level of the program is a real puzzle; he can never reconstitute more than half of the structure, whose moving curves he is supposed to jab with his dart.

“First I need to tell you, Mr. Silverskin, that all our efforts to find Vegas Orlando have been unsuccessful. All we know is that he was supposed to go to the northern part of the Territory with Pluto Saint-Clair. That’s the basic information and it’s still all we’ve been able to learn.”

“You must admit, that isn’t a very promising start,” remarks Silverskin lazily, emptying the memory of his little console and starting again from zero at the same level.

“Maybe, Mr. Silverskin, but that leads us to the root of his disappearance.”

“I’m listening. Try not to be so obscure, if you can manage it.”

“I’ll be extremely clear, Mr. Silverskin. We have found Pluto Saint-Clair in his house in Midnight Oil.”

“Very good. What was he doing?”

“That’s the interesting part. He wasn’t doing anything. He hasn’t gone out for two days, but we were able to watch him inside his Combi-Cube. It was a little odd; he would repeat the same actions several times. He also spent a lot of time sleeping.”

Silverskin plants his dart in an area of the virtual shape that seems relatively stable. Yes, got that one.

“What do you want from me, Mr. Belfond? I’m not paying you to count how many hours Pluto Saint-Clair sleeps. I want you to find out from him what happened to Vegas Orlando.”

“I’m getting there, Mr. Silverskin.”

“Get there, then. You’re wasting my time.”

“Fine. We forced his door last night; we had to act fast and you did give us carte blanche. We woke him up and questioned him. We have our methods.”

“Now you’re piquing my interest a bit. What did Mr. Pluto Saint-Clair tell you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You couldn’t make him talk?”

Johnson Belfond takes Silverskin's meaning immediately; he refuses to let the man believe something so absurd. "I can assure you, Mr. Silverskin, that no human being can resist our methods of interrogation; they're very sophisticated, I must say. He didn't resist."

"So he died before he could talk. You killed him too fast. Somebody spoke too highly of your talents as a professional."

"I'm afraid there is a misunderstanding, Mr. Silverskin. He didn't resist. He talked to us. He told us everything he could."

"Good. And what did the brave Pluto Saint-Clair say, thanks to your sophisticated methods?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Nothing. He told us nothing. And—"

Silverskin cuts him off abruptly. He sits up. The message on his face is clear: *I am the Master, and I will teach you what it means for the Master to be angry.* "Are you mocking me? Mocking me *openly*? Do you really believe I'm going to keep paying you to fuck me over while—"

This time, he is the one who is cut off in mid-sentence. The anger of the Master is replaced by surprise and a sort of incredulity.

"You need to listen to me carefully, Mr. Silverskin. I am a professional, and I don't like it when people question the quality of my work. Let me finish, and pay attention, or I will have to consider our contract null and void."

A pause.

Silverskin concentrates for a few seconds on the metastable shape.

"I'm listening to you, Belfond. Unravel the mystery."

"He talked, but he didn't have anything to say. It's clear that his memory has been very precisely erased. I asked Lee to do a quick bioanalysis, and he detected the presence of programmable neural software, some kind of synthetic metascopolamine. There were a few trace molecules remaining."

"Someone erased his memory? His whole memory?"

"No. It was a professional job. A very targeted neural deprogramming. Basically, everything concerning Vegas Orlando and everything he had discovered on the boy he told you about, and on the famous Professor, is gone. He didn't remember anything, even when we injected him with sodium pentothal. So, we moved on to some rather Draconian measures."

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't remember the past, but he had seen our faces, and we had asked him a lot of questions. We generally try to bring up memories, not

make them disappear. We don't use that kind of antimnemonic neural software. So we turned to the good old method."

Silverskin spoils one of the shape's contours. The good old method. The oldest method in the world. "What did you do with the body?"

"We left it where it was. Our questioning didn't leave any traces; we use mostly trafficked neuromodules that work internally. We just injected him with something harmless, but we also put an air bubble in the syringe that caused an almost immediate embolism. Then we took all the materials he was hiding in his storeroom so it would look like a robbery."

"What kind of materials?"

"That's the funniest part of the whole thing. They're half-dead musical instruments. But they might still be of interest to a techno Triad or two in Vortex Townships."

"No; actually, I'm the one who's interested in them. Get them to me as soon as possible."

Those instruments are more than clues. They are true plunder.

Pluto Saint-Clair couldn't say anything; everything he knew had been erased from his memory. But the objects that could speak for him hadn't been erased.

Those instruments are a key. A key that might open the door leading to the boy and the Professor.

A key that might open the door to immortality.

Silverskin has no way of knowing it, and even if he did it would have great difficulty in penetrating his mind and his immediate field of application, but as Belfond and his two accomplices depart for their next area of operations, one of the huge purplish-feathered crows native to the Territory is taking off from a nearby concrete post into the monochrome blue sky, dry and already filled with the hot sunshine of an early spring.

It soars in a wide circle above Little Congo and then flies north, rising high into the warm morning air. It crosses a large part of the Territory, gliding above isolated townships and gray-blue hordes of tumbleweeds, until it reaches a series of wooded hills where it knows every inch of the terrain and, in particular, the strange human residences cobbled together from debris left long ago by the huge metal bird.

It finds some small prey along the way, field mice and shrews on the plains and savannas, the small hummingbirds that live in the subtropical areas, various snakes that thrive in the arid tundra. All of this is easily available to one who can make use of the third dimension.

It is one of the Territory's birds of prey; it is a diurnal predator. In its world, the day is much more dangerous than the night—because, like men, it is because it is essentially omnivorous that it is a killer more intelligent than a simple meat eater. It is when one knows how to distinguish differences that one can make choices. And it is in making choices that one can tell truth from illusion, the primed trap from the inoffensive object, life from death. For such an animal, a daytime bird of prey, it is a very simple form, elementary but indisputable, of true freedom.

It was such a bird that heralded, without realizing it, the arrival of a new world. Don't they say that Viking navigators used birds to determine the proximity of land?

The crow settles among the high branches of an old maple above a vast carpet of wild oats, chaparral, snakeweed, dandelions, and reeds, a few meters away from a patched-up section of the great metal bird that crashed here once. The instruments of men and nature seem made to come together.

It calls out instinctively, its whole bird-of-prey self full of the radiant day to come, the huge blue sky and the round golden sun. Its cry of animal joy echoes throughout the surrounding woods and reaches the composite shelter near which it is perched.

The sound wave vibrates two pairs of human eardrums.

A voice rings out of an open window:

"There are more hunters on the project than we thought, Yuri; that's all."

Another voice sounds:

"But why did they kill him?"

The first voice answers:

"He couldn't tell them anything, so they made sure he couldn't talk to anyone ever again."

The second voice again:

"You're sure your informer is reliable? I mean, are you 100 percent sure about him?"

The first voice is metallic, armored with certainty:

"He wouldn't have come to Aircrash Circle without a good reason, Yuri. Pluto Saint-Clair is dead and you need to get that through your head. It also

means—make sure you remember this—that you were right.”

The second voice asks, after a few beats of silence:

“Right? Right about what?”

And the first voice, with even more iron in it than before, answers:

“Right about Vegas Orlando. He wasn’t the real commander, the head of the network. Someone was using him; someone was trying to find out our secrets. And after he disappeared, that person attempted to get the answers from Pluto.”

To which the second voice replies:

“Yes. But we erased his neurons. He’s dead because of us.”

This time there is a note of finality to the first voice, brooking no argument:

“No, Yuri; you’re wrong. Pluto is dead because of himself. And the guy from Little Congo killed him. That Jade Silverskin, who we need to find as fast as we can. Before he finds us.”

The crow calls out again in the clear air of the Territory. If it knew how to speak the language of men, it would make an excellent spy—and undoubtedly a double or even triple agent.

If it knew the language of men, this Territory bird of prey would be able to shout that a large-scale catastrophe is brewing here, one that will affect all of humanity, one that will shake the very foundations of the Earth.

“It’s happened,” Campbell says, coming into the cabin. “The first cases are hitting Aircrash Circle. There must not be a square meter of the Territory untouched anymore.”

“I know,” says Yuri. “While you were gone the necros from Snake Zone passed through with two bodies.”

“I stocked up on ammunition at Powder Station; we were almost out. They took almost everything I had of the stuff from the battlefield. The weapons traffickers had never seen so much at once.”

Yuri smiles very slightly. There must still be thousands and thousands of shell casings on that mountain in L’Amiante County.

Thousands of shell casings, and forty bodies rotting in the sun.

“The latest compilation of data is processing. Do we have confirmation for tonight?” asks Yuri, his mind once again connected to the machines of daily life.

“Everything’s been in order since early this morning. Don’t worry; everything is under control. We should be there for the sunset. Link will tell

the sheriff. Simple as that.”

“I hope our data is usable, Chrysler. I hope we didn’t do all this work for nothing.”

“It will be usable, Yuri, and no work is ever done for nothing; that’s a fundamental law in any society, any situation. Even slaves don’t work for free, because they work for their lives.”

“For the Thing, slavery is a superior condition of life, because it’s better to be human furniture than simply fuel for the fire. I’m not sure, though, that it would be in favor of unionized freedom, Chrysler.”

“It’s wrong. We are the Territory Union. And to make a sort of historical comparison, I’m afraid that for it we will be Soviet revolutionaries!”

“No,” says Yuri, who knows the history of his family’s mother country very well. “It’s more like the Thing is the Supreme Soviet, with the Territory as its Gulag, and we are nothing but dissidents—alone and unarmed.”

“You really think we’re going to lose?” asks Campbell with a shade of anxiety in his voice.

“No,” says Yuri again. “The Supreme Soviet ended up in the sewers of history, and the unarmed dissidents won.”

Campbell knits his brow. “Oh, yes—a little like aikido. Use your enemy’s strength against him.”

“No. The Thing contains its own principle of destruction; it just keeps it hidden. There is no strength to turn against it. The Thing is not ‘strength’; it’s the exact opposite. It is a hole, an active vacuum that sucks up anything human, the biological and the mechanical, and even the symbolic.”

“Why does it do that? If we knew that, it would answer a lot of our questions. Does it feed on us, do you think?”

“Yes, but not in the classical sense, not in the *animal* sense. The Thing is an entirely digital entity, much more than the Metastructure ever was; it acts like a machine in some ways—or, rather, like a program.”

“A program?”

“Yes. It is reprogramming the world. It’s not that we feed it, so much as that we have become replacement parts for the world it is building from what it can scavenge of the former world. It doesn’t feed on us; it does what everyone in Junkville does. *It recycles us.*”

Maybe the world will end by resembling a giant replica of Junkville, the city where nothing is created or destroyed, but where everything is constantly transforming.

In fact, thinks Yuri, since it is still acting according to the basic plan of inversion and ontic intensification, we should probably try to imagine not only a planetary version of Junkville but an inverted version, a negative version.

What could that be? What image to give it? Where to start?

Because everything would be infinitely recyclable, everything would equalize. Maybe that's what the desert is: the future topology of the world; equalizing horizontality, monodesic, unidimensional. And in the middle of the desert—what? Nothing? Nothing human?

The Thing needs us. It will recycle us indefinitely, in order to have basic livestock available to it with which to make its digital sacrifice.

Destruction itself is only one phase of recycling.

That means that this destruction, even carried out on a huge scale as now seems to be the case, is only a stage—worse, only a *preliminary* stage.

This destruction, or rather this huge recycling, is the harbinger of a change. A much worse change.

What could be worse than the packaging of human beings in the form of recyclable material? To answer that question would be to answer the one posed earlier by Campbell: Why is the Thing doing all this?

And, surprised by such clarity, Yuri takes only a few seconds to come face-to-face with the blinding crystal of truth:

If the Thing is doing this, it is because it must do it. Just as we breathe or drink water. If the Thing is doing this, it is because it can't do anything else. It is its "soul."

Toward the end of the day, the crow detects new movement near the human shelter from its treetop perch. The humans are spending their time expanding their activities; they are like phenomena bent on disturbing the natural order of things, like particles of pure chaos launched across the cosmos, and they don't even seem to realize it.

Birds like the crow know the whole Territory and the men that live here, and die here.

But birds like the crow are not bent on disturbing the natural order of things. They subsist on the natural order of things. They are the radical plan that plunges its rhizomes deep into the earth and stretches its canopy high into the clouds, higher than any bird can go.

Humans act, and they affect the world around them. They do what they were made to do.

So the diurnal bird of prey of the Territory, integrated into the very heart of this ever-expanding neonature, also does what it was made to do. The sun is setting, and its instinct, the complex machinery that affects its entire metabolism, commands it to spread its wings and take flight again. Full south this time, toward its original position.

It soars above the Territory again as orange light touches the landscape in slanting rays. Again it passes over townships, woods, tundra, and savannas until it reaches the great city of coal and plastic. It crosses the old highway and heads immediately for the concrete posts at the summit of the butte, studded with metal boxes, where humans live.

The butte where, too, humans act and affect the world around them.

In life, there are situations that closely resemble gambits.

That very evening, while Belfond and his little entourage search the Territory for Vegas Orlando's trail, one of Jade Silverskin's friends from Autostrada visits him.

Sometimes it is necessary for a man to die so that victory can be assured. Vegas Orlando showed the way and blazed the trail; now someone is needed to follow through. To put death on his side. And his friend from Autostrada is in contact with just such a someone. It is so extraordinary, so unusual, that Silverskin instinctively senses that a new opportunity, a bearer of true hope, has come to replace what the vanished man represented.

His friend doesn't come free, certainly. He is leaving the Territory to try to return to the west coast of Canada. He needs a lot of gasoline and working fuel cells. Silverskin immediately writes him a certified voucher for two hundred liters of octane from Reservoir Can, and promises him formally that hybrid technology will be provided to him within forty-eight hours.

That is what is called a *deal*. An act of willpower. A miracle. His friend from Autostrada is leaving Grand Junction, but in exchange he is sending in

the future. Silverskin's future.

Vegas Orlando is the past, in every sense of the word.

Maybe the old bastard simply double-crossed me and fled the Territory, immunized against mutations of the virus. Maybe he's dead, buried somewhere. Maybe someone's forcing him to talk at this exact moment, just like we tried to force Pluto Saint-Clair.

What counts is that I have enemies in the Territory, people protecting the boy and the Professor. And if I have enemies, not only do I need allies, I need to become the pitiless enemy of anyone keeping me from being immunized.

And what the man from Autostrada has brought with him is of inestimable value. It is from New Arizona, from the Midwestern desert, from even farther away than that. It is rare. Incredibly rare. And as such, it is worth a veritable fortune. But its value comes from its very nature. It is a holdover from the Metastructure. A holdover from the Metamachine. It is a being from the World Before the Fall.

It is a machine.

Even better, it is an android.

"Very few androids survived the Death of the Metamachine. You're a sort of miracle, if I understand correctly, Mr. Alan Cortek-Cybion 3222," Jade Silverskin says.

"Call me Alan. Humans didn't do much better; there were just more of you to begin with, that's all, and it's true that as bioartificial machines we were connected to the Metastructure."

"How have you survived, then?"

"Like some of you. I don't know. For now, other than a few minor problems, I haven't been affected at all, and it's been more than twelve years now."

"You really don't know why? Or how? You must realize that the answer to this question is valuable. It could command the very highest price."

"I know that very well, which is why I'm here."

"In Junkville? The rare androids that survived the First Fall all died during the Second. You can still find some of their biocomponents in Vortex Townships; that's all that's left of them."

"No."

“What do you mean? If there was a living android in Junkville I’d be the first to know about it. The Triads go in for some of their organs. The necros are very patient; they can wait for months, once they’ve scoped out a potential target. ...”

“Maybe not in Junkville itself, but somewhere else in the Territory. Latest-generation androids like me are capable of ‘sensing’ at a distance the presence and location of their fellows; it’s a quantum correlation effect.”

“In plain language, what does that mean?”

“That there is at least one other surviving android in the Territory. And that I need to find it.

“As you know, all first-generation androids were destroyed in the space of a few weeks after October ’57. The second generation, from the ’30s, suffered pretty much the same fate. Only third-generation and especially fourth-generation androids—like me, and we’re very rare—had a somewhat acceptable survival rate, lower than that of humans, but still ...”

“When does the fourth generation date from?”

“You won’t believe it, but it was one of the Metastructure’s last projects. At Cortek, the first Cybion models were created in 2052. I’m the very last one.”

“The very last android?”

“Yes—at least, the last one produced in the biotech labs of the Cortek Corporation.”

“You were manufactured in the Ring?”

“Yes. Well ... until the final shaping, which was done here on Earth. That was common procedure for the Cortek Corporation. Can you guess?”

“Guess what?”

“My place and date of birth.”

“You were born in Grand Junction?”

“No; no, not at all. There weren’t any android builders in the Territory, if I recall correctly. You’re missing the important point.”

“I’m listening.”

“I was born in Hong Kong, in one of Cortek’s main final-assembly centers, near a huge health safety camp, called Health Containment Camp 77.”

“Okay, and ...?”

“Some people think the ‘entity’ that destroyed the Metastructure came from that camp.”

“That’s just one rumor among thousands. Other people say it happened here in Grand Junction.”

“All right; we’ll talk about it again later. The date might interest you, though.”

“Your birth date?”

“I was born on October 4, 2057, Mr. Silverskin. I was conceived at the very moment the Cataclysm happened, or very nearly. Have I made myself clear?”

“You’re the very last artificial human. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Probably, but that’s not the most important part.”

“You’re immunized? Naturally immunized?”

“If the word *naturally* can apply to me, then yes, that’s it.”

“And do you think there are other androids in the same situation? Other fourth-generation androids among the last to be created?”

“Now you’ve got it exactly, Mr. Silverskin.”

“And this android, that you think lives in the Territory—you think it’s like you, is that it?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to find it. Right?”

“Yes, Mr. Silverskin.”

Silverskin gazes his world-weary entomologist’s gaze at the artificial man.

“I’d like to help you, but on one condition.”

“What’s that, Mr. Silverskin?”

“There aren’t many people with my network of influence and information in Junkville, I warn you. To be honest, there aren’t any.”

“I know; otherwise I wouldn’t have come to see you. But I have much to offer you in exchange; you’ll see. What is your condition, Mr. Silverskin?”

Silverskin does not blink. He simply says: “If you want me to help you find this android, you’ll have to tell me why you want to kill it.”

33 > *SPACE ODDITY*

Link tears his gaze away from Judith to look at the sky. The young woman points her telescope confidently toward a region in the northeast.

"I've got them," she says after a moment. "The orange speck they told me about. They've entered the high atmosphere; there will be several hours now when communication is totally cut off."

"It isn't like they communicate much anyway. How long before they land?" he adds quickly, before Judith can respond to the first remark.

"They told me it would be variable according to weather and how the flight goes. They're going to execute a complete revolution before entering the stratosphere. Oh—I didn't tell you; the sheriff decided that the cosmodrome is out of the question, because the landing would be seen by the whole population of Grand Junction. So he told me to send them another GPS location."

"Where?"

"Napierville, in the extreme north of the Territory. The sheriff is gathering some men to welcome the orbiter."

"The north?"

"Yes, a low plain in the former Quebecois county of the Gardens of Napierville; it's still called that. It's near an abandoned city called Hemmingford."

Link does not reply. As always, the sheriff knows what to do. As far as the Law of Bronze goes, it is impeccable. But as far as the Shield, as far as what will soon be directly in the line of fire, there is no doubt, but a deep, parallel certainty.

The cosmodrome is also a key. A key to the sky. A key to escaping the Thing.

That is why the Thing is attacking the Territory so ferociously. It must be acting the same way everywhere in the world where there are potentially usable astroport facilities.

One of the first goals he will apply himself to once he has confronted the Thing will be the cosmodrome—restoring the cosmodrome to working order.

Yes. The certainty is there, as perfectly implanted as if it were injected by one of Yuri's hypodermic syringes.

One day he will turn the cosmodrome's lights back on, but not to welcome men desirous of returning from the Ring. He will restore everything to working order, including the rockets stored in their hangars.

Of this museum half buried in sand, he will recreate a launch point toward the America of the sky.

The sun is low on the horizon as they near the Ridge. The sharp, fiery light causes points and lines of brilliance to glint on the metal of the police car. Campbell does not even turn his head.

"They're expecting us."

"Normal. The sheriff keeps a close eye on every damn Triad in Grand Junction."

"Yeah, but I called Link and told him according to standard procedure, so Langlois knows about it, too."

"That won't stop them from monitoring our entry, Chrysler. That's just how it is."

Heavy Metal Valley is the Fortress of the Territory. Its sanctuary. Notifying the sheriff of your arrival doesn't guarantee you automatic entry into the area; it just keeps you from finding yourself cornered by several patrol cars, with big, nasty cops holding electric billy clubs reminding you how to spell R-E-S-T-R-I-C-T-E-D A-R-E-A, idiot.

"The two French guys," notes Campbell, stopping in front of the patrol car barring the road.

"Exactly," replies Yuri, "and it's going to be day and night."

Lecerf shared the adventure of the Convoy with them; they have tested each other; the young sniper knows that Yuri and Campbell are capable of killing, and vice versa. He knows they are men, and vice versa. He knows they are ready to die for the Library because it is their mission, just as they know he would die where he stands to defend the Convoy of the Territory, for the same reasons.

The other Frenchman is the one who made it possible for Campbell to make contact with the sheriff and Link de Nova a little more than two years ago. Chrysler's father knew him before Chrysler was born, when the man was still just a teenager newly arrived from Europe. The Frenchman's father also worked for the cosmodrome at the time, and Campbell's father had more or less been friends with him, apparently.

Schutzberg. An Alsatian. They say he hates Muslims ferociously, and that when Wilbur Langlois decided to have the throats of all their Muslim prisoners cut after the attack on the cosmodrome, Schutzberg had been the first one to volunteer for the job. They say he took care of fifty men by himself, and took evident pleasure in the task.

He is worse than all the other cops in HNV put together. He is not violent; he *is* violence. He is not the Law like Sheriff Wilbur Langlois is; he is the shadow cast by it on the blood-soaked earth.

"He's a fucking bastard," says Yuri, "but he's a Territory cop. The fucking bastards are the ones you have to be nice to, especially when they're cops. And especially in the Territory."

"So keep the smile on your face and be nice. We are the Territory," says Campbell just before he opens the car door.

Later, Yuri will tell himself that the problem is not so much knowing how to be nice to the last cops in the Territory as knowing what to do when the biggest bastard of them all acts somewhat friendly toward you.

Later, Yuri will tell himself they should have been more careful.

"You're late," Schutzberg says. "The sheriff wants to see you, urgently."

"We're *five minutes* late," replies Campbell, "and I've already arranged things with the sheriff. We need to see Link de Nova urgently, and Professor Zarkovsky."

"Five minutes or five hours, I don't give a fuck. And the sheriff wants to see you urgently *before* you see Link de Nova and the Professor urgently. Am I making myself clear?"

Campbell glances at Yuri out of the corner of his eye. This guy really is a fucking bastard. But yeah, he's a Territory cop.

"Okay," he says, with a sigh of resignation. "Lead us to the sheriff's office."

“No,” Schutzberg replies. “We’ve got to stay here. Do you remember the way, or do I need to draw you a map?”

“Are you guarding HMT?” asks Campbell, careful to keep the impertinence out of his voice. “New orders from the sheriff?”

“The only one authorized to answer any questions is the sheriff himself. Actually, I’m not even sure you’re authorized to ask him any.”

Florian Schutzberg really is a fucking bastard, but he’s a true Territory cop, thinks Yuri again. He, too, would sacrifice himself without the slightest hesitation to ensure the success of his mission, to protect Heavy Metal Valley, to obey the Law of Bronze, to cast his shadow on the blood-soaked earth.

They all belong to this land; their blood has flowed here for thousands and thousands of years. But soon there will be no human blood left to spill to quench its thirst; they will all have lost not only their lives but their deaths.

Who would have thought that this just-ending day would be another of the majestic and terrible “Turning Points” that have been ceaselessly occurring in his life for months now? He had said to Link de Nova, after one of those cataclysmic days, that it might be the first but it wouldn’t be the last.

In fact, he thinks, as they face a new and sudden change of situation, it is like the whole business of false numerical infinity and true ontological infinity; nothing can be added. There is no succession of turning point days. There is really only one event, even if it seems divided into a series of repetitions. There is only a single day, a single turning point, and he is only just now reaching the curve.

At very high speed.

The total and sudden change of situation is happening before his eyes and, strangely, he is hardly surprised. The Turning Point Day is continuing; that’s all. The Great Day/Night of Change. The Daynight of the Territory.

And this is what is happening at the moment:

The sheriff’s office, the midnight blue police trailer, has swallowed them like a huge rectangular whale.

Inside it, Wilbur Langlois is waiting for them with Slade Vernier, Erwin Slovak, and a third deputy, a man originally from Ottawa named Bob Chamberlain.

Campbell asks the reason for this mandatory, unplanned visit. He begins to explain that the situation in the Territory is worsening fast; that they are overextended; that the Triads are now keeping them from doing their work correctly, but that they have compiled all the data in their possession and they need to get it to the Professor as soon as possible. ...

The sheriff replies with the machine smile of the Law of Bronze. The Law smiles like a gun at the moment it shoots a bullet, with fire, powder, and steel. And it is with great calm that he explains to them that the *entire* situation changed, suddenly and completely, the moment they set foot in his territory, in the county of Heavy Metal Valley, and in the sheriff's office itself.

"I can't place you formally under arrest, but I have the right to put you in a monitored residence within Humvee."

"The right?" repeats Campbell sarcastically. "The right to act like the Great Mogul? You'd better tell yourself this is only a dream; you'll wake yourself right up."

Yuri smiles. The good old Territory joke.

But the sheriff is not joking.

"I'm going to confiscate all the firearms that are probably still hidden in your pickup—and the pickup, too. You cannot leave HMV—and I mean Humvee, the city itself—without my permission, nor can you cross the borders of the county."

"I hope you've got some very good reasons for acting illegally this way, Sheriff."

Wilbur Langlois' smile does not alter; it seems suspended for eternity, with the Law, above the blood-soaked earth.

"I am the Law, Campbell; and beyond that, I have excellent reasons for my actions. To start, what would you say to a very strong suspicion of murder in the first degree, with the complicity of your friend here?"

Campbell knows every ruse in the Territory, thinks Yuri; he won't flinch at this one. *Maybe they found the body of the man with the red Buick. Maybe I didn't do enough to make sure it would disappear at the bottom of the lake.*

"Murder? The last time I committed a 'murder,' as you say, Sheriff, we were together in the Notre Dame mountains, and if I remember correctly you would have a lot more charges to answer to than my 'acolyte' and I would."

“You’re a good one, Campbell. I want you to know I respect both you and your young friend. I know a lot about you in particular; I only met your father after he left the county, when you were born and they moved to Omega Blocks. But he came back here when I took over after the death of John Winston Lagarde, the previous sheriff, who was killed when an operation went wrong in the northern part of the strip. After that I didn’t see him much, but we’d cross paths from time to time at the cosmodrome when he became head of security for Platform 1. He was a good man, your father.”

“Are you arresting us because of my father’s career, Sheriff? I hope you’ve got a better argument than that.”

“I told you, you and Yuri are probably going to be accused of murder. I’m simply handling things for the short term. It’s unexpected and ... let’s say, a little complicated to manage, let alone to explain, but I can assure you, Campbell, that if I tell you I’m looking at the possibility of accusing you of murder, you can bet I’ve got a few cards up my sleeve.”

“Let’s see what kind of cards—and what kind of sleeve.”

Wilbur Langlois simply gestures in the direction of his deputy Erwin Slovak, another European who, Yuri knows, told the sheriff about the embezzlements committed by Pluto Saint-Clair. It was the sheriff who then told them about it. And the loop closes here. Closes on them, like the teeth of a trap that didn’t even know it was a trap.

Erwin Slovak is like a cop replica of Campbell, another human computer. He begins, calmly, evenly, and precisely, to explain the evidence against them. He really is a lot like them; he may be a cop, but he talks more like a doctor than a killer. The cop-killer-doctor is in the process of unveiling the truth—naked, simple, and disarmed. But it is useless.

Because Yuri has already realized, as has Campbell—their good old intuitive connection—that the day they die, each of them will know very exactly what the other is experiencing.

Erwin Slovak is a man with a lot of experience. One day, Yuri heard Slade Vernier alluding to his talents as a soldier: *He was a mercenary for several military private contractors during the Grand Jihad. I know before that he started his career in the Foreign Legion during the Second French Civil War; then, after the defeat of the Republican isolationists, he joined the SAS. He had British citizenship through his mother. Then war broke out in its turn in England, and then in all of southern Europe. I don’t know how*

he ended up coming here after the Fall, but the sheriff hired him immediately on the basis of experience. Hierarchically, he's one of my lieutenants. He commands the second squadron.

The report by one Territory soldier on another Territory soldier. But it was enough to give a very precise idea of the talents possessed by the man in question.

The sheriff was not mistaken. The Law of Bronze knows how to recognize its guardians.

The Anglo-German-Czech cop—a neo-European typical of the post-Fall world—managed to spy on Pluto Saint-Clair, Link de Nova, and the two teenagers from New Arizona a few days before the arrival of the Convoy; he had gone unnoticed despite not having taken any particular precautions. Then he had followed them, *them*, with Pluto Saint-Clair, Link de Nova, and the man they had killed in cold blood. And he had gone unnoticed. Despite all their precautions.

“You’re very good. At around fifty meters you would have been able to see him, and surprise him.”

And Yuri thinks: But he’s the one who saw us, and he didn’t come to surprise us, that night, in the middle of nowhere in Champlain Banks.

He came so the sheriff could surprise us, at his chosen moment, *on his own territory*.

Now Milan Djordjevic takes up the thread of the narrative. He is not only a member of the grand jury, he is the father of Link de Nova. He will be even more difficult to get around, thinks Yuri, than the sheriff and his Law of Bronze.

“Your son is young and he wants to do good,” Campbell replies to Djordjevic’s opening volley. “Yes, he sometimes makes mistakes, but this time it was because he fell in with Junkville scum like Pluto Saint-Clair.”

“I’ve told my son from the beginning not to get mixed up with your dirty little business; now look where it has led us!”

“Listen, Mr. Djordjevic; I’m going to be very clear about this, for once and for all: We are not trafficking in organs or anything else. We are collecting information to help Link—excuse me, Gabriel—to counteract the effects of the Thing. We receive nothing in return but a well-deserved salary that barely covers our expenses. On the other hand, your son’s gifts, Mr.

Djordjevic, have helped the whole community of HMOV. Without him, even the sheriff's dog would be blind and probably dead as we speak. So you would do well, simply put, to reevaluate your position. It is illogical. And counterproductive."

"It's going to be more and more difficult to keep the secret about Gabriel," remarks the sheriff.

"I know that, Sheriff Langlois, but my programmable scopolamine still works very well. That said, we can't lose sight of the fact that it was the immunization campaign that Link—excuse me, Gabriel—conducted here in '64 and '65 that led to all the rumors. Rumors we selected, hand-picked, and analyzed until they led us straight back to Link—excuse me, Gabriel—two years ago. You were very lucky that we were the first ones to figure it out. Others—Mr. Djordjevic, to be exact—would have been much less picky."

"What do you mean?" asks Djordjevic, a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Ask Sheriff Langlois for a detailed report on the slavery in Toy Division, Grand Funk Railroad, and now, they say, some parts of New Arizona. Link would have become the serf of some warlord, or pimp, or head of a necro Triad, or boss of an agency of hired killers—you get the picture—and he would have immunized every one of them on sight, and then they would have put him on the market for everyone else in the area, and believe me, they wouldn't have sold off his gifts; they would have ruined the entire Territory without blinking an eye. So spare me your humanist couplets. We are in a position to protect Link—sorry, but that's what we call him, Link—because we can protect the secret of his existence, and make sure his gifts are still useful to the communities of the Territory at the same time. Your crap about simony doesn't hold water. We're doing a job here. We are the Doctors."

He's right, thinks Yuri; does he even know how right he is? Does he know that we are the Camp Doctors?

There is a powdery trace, milky white and luminescent in the twilight sky, amid the few stars that have just appeared.

A line that zigzags here and there, getting a little larger each time, leaving sparkling crackles of fire in its wake that twinkle like stars.

Nothing is said by anyone in the small group assembled on the plain slightly north of the ghost town of Hemmingford; their vehicles have been arranged in a half-circle with headlights blazing, forming a large electric fire that can be seen from the sky, just as ancient tribes from the earliest ages of man would have done. Silence reigns as it must have done before language was invented. What is there to say, really, to add to what is unfolding, to this writing that is inscribing its message in the skies?

Men are coming back. Men are coming back to Earth. Men are coming back to Earth just as all the others are preparing to leave it for good.

After having been virtually stopped under the reign of the Metastructure, spatial conquest, now conducted in the inverted order imposed by the Thing, the Post-Ante-Machine, is reversing itself in turn and starting again; backward, but with all the particular dynamics of the original model.

Spatial conquest is no longer frozen; in fact, on one hand it is beginning again, a hundred times stronger, and much farther, through the collective action of the Orbital Ring seeking to colonize Mars, the moon, or who knows what mass of asteroids; on the other hand it is *returning* to the source, but as if to another planet, from its abandoned orbit, through the singular action of the android couple about to land in the Territory this night.

Link looks at the other members of the group for a moment, their eyes fixed on the white line winding among the still-faint stars. His father, his mother, the Professor, two of the sheriff's deputies, Judith Sevigny, her parents, Father Newman—practically the whole City Council. In the distance he can see the quivering verdigris of an errant mass of tumbleweeds rolling across the landscape, and then the dust cloud announcing the arrival of Wilbur Langlois and his entire squadron. In a sense, all of HMTV is preparing to welcome the "Terranauts."

The electric fire produces even more light aimed in the direction of that part of the sky from which men are returning.

Men ... it is undoubtedly not coincidental that it is two androids who have made this crucial decision.

It is undoubtedly not coincidental that the Creature of the Creature is that which, in the inverted order of the Thing, is returning to the Earth of Men.

Nothing has the luxury of being coincidental anymore.

Everything is connected.

Everything has always been connected.

So here is the Man.

And it is a woman. An artificial one.

She is the first one to step out of the small orbiter. She is the first to put her feet on the ground. She is the one who signals to them with her hand as her flight companion emerges from the cabin in his turn.

She is dressed in a silvery flight suit, and she removes her helmet with an easy gesture. Her blond hair floats around her face in the fresh evening breeze. Her name, they will learn later, is Sky Lumina.

The man follows her, catches up to her; they walk forward side by side. The male android is named Orson Vectro. They will learn that in the Ring, free androids have shed their series numbers, just as Link's mother did during her Christian baptism.

As they advance, Link tries—as he has done so often with his mother—to pick out any notable difference between the androids approaching and the men waiting for them. But there is nothing. Not in their movements, nor their attitudes, nor their gestures, and especially not in their features or facial expressions. Nothing in their appearance, the texture of their skin, the structure of their bodies, nothing organic. Nothing in their voices, either, or their language, or their eyes. Nothing in what nestles mysteriously at the core of one's being.

They are what they are, to perfection. They are Images of Man, just as Man is an Image of God.

For them, the Fall is consubstantial to their existence, because they are born of the Creature. In fact they have not really “fallen;” they have never known, will never have to know, that fundamental failure.

In this sense they are much freer than us, really. The differences that exist between our two species only reinforce our similarity, and illuminate our respective destinies.

They were created by us, and yet it is as if they came *before* us, not after.

They were created by us, and yet their differential looks out on inexplicable freedom, rather than toward the greatest danger.

They are a little more than human.

They are a little less than machines.

They are so close to us—too close to us.

They are *much too human*.

Later, while the two androids are being questioned by the county's Security Council, Link keeps at a distance, outside the school bus. Not far from him, his mother is sitting on the hood of an antique and very rare E-type Jaguar, whose elegant curves gleam in the starlight.

He immediately senses the invisible waves swirling around her like furious bees; he can hear them humming crazily inside her head.

Link approaches her; it has been two or three days now since he felt this worry take possession of his mind. Until now, he has been too busy to really pay attention to it. Until now, he has chalked it up to ... anything, nothing special. Until now, he hasn't shared his mother's worry.

"What's on your mind, Mum? I've been noticing it for days, but tonight it's taking on alarming proportions. Even Milan is aware of it; I can tell."

"You know, I suppose, that fourth-generation androids were considered as complete individuals by a special directive of the Metastructure?"

"Yes, Mother; of course I know that."

"And you know that androids of that generation possess a sort of inner gift concerning the presence, near or far, of other androids of the same model."

"Yes, Mother; I know that, too."

"I feel the presence of one of those androids. I feel him approaching the Territory. And I don't like what I'm feeling. Not at all."

Link is careful to keep any unkind sarcasm out of his voice. He really does want to share his mother's worry fully. Now the fog needs to be lifted. He has to admit his temporary blindness to his mother.

"Mother ... you know that's completely normal; two androids landed in the Territory tonight; they've been preparing to do it for days. They left their cluster almost twenty-four hours ago. What you're feeling is totally natural."

The artificial people from the Ring are not threatening at all. On the contrary.

"I'm not talking about two androids, Gabriel. I said *one*. One android. Alone. And I don't think he's come from the Ring to save us. I think he's come from the depths of nothingness to destroy us."

Link stares at his mother. A gulf opens up inside him like a titanic mouth capable of swallowing the whole world.

His mother can't be wrong about this.

It is her "being."

The conclusion is there, loud and clear: as usual, the Thing is adapting. And it is adapting in advance, with perfect timing, as if it can sense with great precision the defenses man is erecting against it.

Two androids have come back down from the Ring in an unexpected gesture of interspecies solidarity, right into the mouth of the monster the Earth has become, without regard for the risks they will face. Simultaneously, and hidden by this double apparition from the sky, the Thing has just released a monster into the Territory, another android, an artificial human in the service of nature as it now is.

Everything that happened before now was only a prologue.

The War of Wars is only beginning.

PART THREE

Anything that is not truly *one* being is not truly one *being*.
—LEIBNIZ

The desert multiplies itself by itself; what was its interior is now only its
envelope.
—ERNEST HELLO

34 > *THE HUMAN LEAGUE*

It is the equinox. He is twenty-three years old, and he has killed a dozen men.

That is how he has begun his adult life.

He must also count the forty bodies rotting in the sun in L'Amiante County; in one sense or another, he killed them, too.

At the same time, with the synchronicity of a perfectly timed bomb, the Thing's final offensive has attained a new level throughout the Territory. Thanks to Link de Nova's powers HNV is still protected; the Sanctuary is still operational; the Fortress is holding up. But it won't last long. The time of the secret is coming. The Thing is killing more and more humans, and sooner or later there will be just enough of them left to mean that Sheriff Langlois' Fortress is a sort of natural shelter against evil.

Which is false, of course.

The only rampart that can protect the men of the Territory is the boy with the guitar. He has the cognitive power necessary to fight the numeric devolution now. The problem is, he is alone. And the Thing, whatever its form, is able to invade hundreds of humans at once. Thousands, probably. Maybe even millions.

It is the equinox; he is twenty-three years old, and he has killed a dozen men. Forty, even.

And everywhere now, all over the whole Territory, from New Arizona to Monolith Hills, from Lake Champlain to X-15, dozens, hundreds, thousands of corpses are clogging the streets, the paths, the roads, the lanes, the avenues, the boulevards, the deserts, the hills, the rivers, the valleys, the tundra, and the woods. Everything. Everywhere.

And everywhere now—all over the Territory, in apartments, cabins, shelters, Combi-Cubes, mobile homes, habitation capsules, natural refuges, and various vehicles—everywhere, men are seeing their language, and the principle of individuation connected to it, pulverized from the inside, just

before they begin to emit continuous streams of binary numbers of which they are nothing but the organic calculator.

Everywhere in the Territory. The Triads are overextended; they are endlessly forming myriads of microcompanies that sometimes last only a few days, just long enough to sweep a township clean, just before, their work hardly begun, they are overwhelmed by the unceasing and ever-growing workload. Then another group takes their place, and everything starts over. Eyewitness accounts have piled up during the course of the last month. From sheriff's patrols, for example. Langlois has given Campbell the exceptional authorization to bring as much equipment out of Aircrash Circle as possible before his cabin is pillaged like so many others.

"I'm going to hang on to your friend. That'll help you avoid temptation," says Langlois, simply.

Campbell does not respond. That very night, he comes back with his pickup full to bursting with everything he could gather from his home, including his complete arsenal—which is immediately put under lock and key by the sheriff's men.

Chrysler, getting out of his truck, announces to Yuri, Wilbur Langlois, and his deputies:

"The word *catastrophe* seems too weak. It's worse than what I saw in 2057, or during the first mutation in '63. Much worse. Infinitely worse. The acceleration is staggering. She's looking to annihilate us fast."

"She? Who is 'she'?" demands Erwin Slovak, the man who knew to spy on them under the star-filled sky, the man who, like them, is a true man of the night.

"It's just a figure of speech," explains Yuri. "We call it 'the Thing'; of course it doesn't have a gender. But to make things simple we say 'she.'"

"The problem is that it isn't a 'Thing,' even in an abstract sense."

Yuri and Campbell turn simultaneously in the direction of the new voice coming from behind them. The boy with the guitar, his hood pulled up over his head, is watching them with a mixture of glacial calm and great intensity, an odd combination that gives his gaze the somber glow of a lodestone.

"We know it isn't a 'Thing,' Link, because strictly speaking it has no material existence. Sometimes we say 'the entity,'" says Yuri.

"That isn't much better."

"We have to find a name for it, Link."

“I think that’s the problem. This ‘Thing’ that isn’t one can’t have a name, principally because it isn’t an ‘entity.’”

“By that you mean, I imagine, that this ‘Thing’ isn’t a ‘being.’ We agree with you. But still, we have to call it something.”

“You don’t understand, Yuri. It isn’t so much the fact that it’s a nonentity, an absolute nonbeing, that determines its very unique existence. It’s the fact that she—or he, it doesn’t matter—is not anything with a gender. He or she can’t be an ‘entity,’ and so consequently it can’t have an identity, because, above all, this ‘Thing’ isn’t *one thing*.”

“What do you mean, not one thing? Do you mean there are thousands of them? But where?”

And at the precise instant he asks the question, Yuri realizes the answer like an explosion deep in his brain.

“Oh, no.”

“Yes, Yuri. Your ‘Thing’ is carrying on the work of the Metastructure, but a dimension removed. Men *disindividuate* via the network they themselves form through numeric language.”

“Network? You’re saying they are interconnected?”

“Obviously. The ‘Thing’ is not a virus, we know that; but neither is it the external, hidden, mysterious ‘entity’ you’re searching for. Everyone needs to understand what I’m saying: this is an ecology, like the Professor explained. But there again, its evolutionist consequences are the *opposite* of any ecology.”

“Explain,” says Campbell, his snakelike curiosity piqued.

“It’s a mutation. But not a mutation of the Metastructure, like we thought. *It is a mutation of Humanity*. A devolutive mutation. It isn’t ‘one thing,’ because it can never individuate. I’ve discussed this with my father and the Professor. Conclusion ...”

“It’s okay; I’ve got it.” Yuri’s eyes gleam. “Humans themselves are becoming the Thing.”

“Almost. But not really. It isn’t ‘one thing,’ but it forms a sort of ‘totality,’ or a perfect simulation of it, in any case. I repeat: *Humanity, in a generic devolutive form, IS the Thing*. And I believe this numeric devolution isn’t the final stage.”

“I see,” says Yuri, concealing the shock of certainty as best he can. “It is analogous to the Passion of the Christ.”

“Absolutely, Yuri. And the internal logic of ‘the Thing’—or Post-Man—which can never be singular in any way—tells it to recycle machines, recycle organisms, recycle language ... there will be a next stage, and very soon.”

“You told me another Fall was impossible. ...”

“The time for ‘Falls’ is past, Yuri. My father had a very hard time admitting it, but now the next stage will be the nailing to the cross. And on Golgotha, it came very quickly after the last ‘Fall.’”

“A whole library crossed the ocean and then Quebec. You just found a way to counter the numeric devolution,” says Campbell, his face dark.

“Nothing is lost yet on that front,” says the young man, a bit mysteriously. “We don’t have much time, that’s all.”

“We don’t have the most important thing,” answers Campbell, icily.

Spring makes its appearance on this land devastated by death that is not really death, that condemns everything indefinitely to its indefinite regime. Death as digital recycling.

There has never been as luminous an early April in the Territory, thinks Yuri. Beauty has never come so close to the Beast. And we have never been so close to either of them.

That day, the sheriff calls a special Council meeting. Yuri and Campbell are very cordially invited. It quickly becomes clear that the sheriff’s Council has become a sort of grand jury, charged with deciding whether or not the county of Heavy Metal Valley will prosecute them for murder. According to the sheriff’s way of thinking, being cordial never means compromising the Law. The Law itself is entitled to the luxury of being cordial. You can always keep a smile on your face as you press the trigger. Yuri knows something about that.

Before any discussion begins, Langlois forbids any argument based on technical problems of jurisdiction.

“The Metastructure doesn’t exist anymore; jurisdictions don’t exist anymore, and neither do the Global Bureau, political confederations, or continental governance blocs. I represent the last active police force in the Territory, and I consider the whole thing my de facto natural jurisdiction.”

It is clear. It needs no reply. It is the Law of Bronze.

There are some lawyers in the county, but Yuri and Campbell are in mutual agreement that they will defend themselves. There is no time left for procedure and legal bullshit. *They'll take the bull by the horns and it'll be over before it begins; that jury might as well be a firing squad*, Chrysler said. Yuri thinks they are at great risk of ending up in that uncomfortable position anyway, but he also knows they have no choice. They have to lance the abscess, by whatever means necessary. They are the Camp Doctors. They should be able to lance an abscess.

The Humvee City Council has gathered in its entirety, down to Milan Djordjevic, who maintains an icy silence throughout the proceedings. The sheriff presides, flanked by Slade Vernier on his right and Erwin Slovak on his left, as principal witness and second assistant. The two androids from space have been invited to observe, something they have been doing since their arrival in the Territory. Each day they accompany the patrols around HMV. Each day they walk across the city of heavy metal and all over the county, all the way to the cosmodrome. They learn. They prepare. No one knows for what, exactly.

Representatives of HMV's Christian communities are there, and the rabbi. Even Balthazar, the cyberdog, is seated near the sheriff.

So Campbell takes the bull by the horns, and puts them in front of the firing squad. The Law of Bronze against its blacksmiths, thinks Yuri.

"You cannot deny that you cut this man down in cold blood."

"First let me draw your attention to the fact that Deputy Erwin Slovak himself admitted that he came within two hundred meters of the scene. His night binoculars allowed him to see what was happening, but he claims he couldn't make out the details. But the devil is in the details, especially in this particular case."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this man was part of a gang of killers from Junkville, working for another man who we have traced—someone discreet, powerful, and dangerous. Someone who represented a direct threat to Link de Nova and Pluto Saint-Clair, as subsequent events proved. And I want to be very clear about this: he represented a threat to every community in Heavy Metal Valley."

"Don't try to act like the saviors of the county, Mr. Campbell," says the sheriff. "The county can act on its own behalf perfectly well."

The Law of Bronze, thinks Yuri. The Law of the Territory. It is the Territory that protects men, and not the reverse.

“I’m not acting like a savior or anything else, Sheriff; I’m no actor. This man is responsible, or partly responsible, for the death of Pluto Saint-Clair. He and his accomplices were planning to kidnap Link de Nova and the Professor and force them to work for their group. Do you think that’s enough of an argument in our favor?”

“It doesn’t authorize you to kill in cold blood.”

“No? Well, then, since ‘technical problems of jurisdiction’ don’t count anymore, indict Slade Vernier for war crimes. You’ll be indicting yourself at the same time, for the atrocities committed during the attack on the cosmodrome. The formula doesn’t work.”

Silence fills the police trailer, and the acrid stench of half-forgotten crimes, deaths buried in the ash of memory, corpses past but not decomposed.

They are all there, the living and the dead.

“Did you kill in cold blood, yes or no?”

It is Judith Sevigny’s father who has asked the question. The head of HNV’s Catholic community. And Reverend Sommerville, who occupies the same hierarchical post for Anglicans and Protestants, nods his head vigorously in agreement.

“We absolutely must discriminate between legitimate defense and calculated assassination.”

Rabbi Apelbaum, who represents the last twelve Jews in the Territory, does not speak, but everything about his demeanor suggests that he is in full support of his counterpart’s words. And the Greek Libyan Georges Dimitrios, a survivor of the Quebecois civil wars, nods in the affirmative as well, fixing Campbell with his single black eye.

We’ve got both Testaments against us; this isn’t going to be easy, thinks Yuri.

He watches Campbell keep the slightly carnivorous smile on his face. He is calculating, computing, selecting the best response. Campbell, the human computer.

“If you will allow it, honorable members of the Council, I would say it falls somewhere in the middle.”

“There is no middle when it comes to legitimate defense and murder,” Father Newman replies dryly.

Father Newman represents the collected Christian communities in the county. Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, and Catholics have elected and reelected him to this post for more than twelve years. He was part of the very first group of dissidents sheltered by Langlois in his Sanctuary of metal, before the Fall. He is an old man of great authority, knowledge, and wisdom. He is a priest, a Franciscan. But Yuri knows that Saint Francis himself couldn't stop Chrysler Campbell. Especially when it comes to manipulating information as if it were a simple genome. Especially when it comes to inventing the truth—that is, the appearances it is capable of taking on.

“You're wrong, Father. The middle consists of the fact that, on one hand, I was psychologically ready to kill at the slightest suspicious move, and maybe even without a valid reason, because of what he had tried to do to Link and to Pluto Saint-Clair—who was killed later, let me remind you—and that, on the other hand, in a factual sense, the poor guy had the bad idea to make a suspicious move.”

“That's not what Erwin Slovak told us,” remarks the sheriff.

“Slovak couldn't see anything, not from two hundred meters away, or even one hundred. That cretin with the red Buick wanted to arrange the kidnapping of Link de Nova and Pluto Saint-Clair in order to get to the Professor. If he had succeeded, Mr. Sheriff, sir, you wouldn't be able to do a thing to save your Territory.”

“I'm tougher than you think. And you haven't answered the question.”

“I know exactly what I'm talking about. Tough or not, if they'd gotten their hands on Link de Nova, it would have been all over, whether you want to believe that or not. And I did answer the question—I had made up my mind to kill at the slightest suspicious move, and, as I said, he made a suspicious move.”

“What kind of move? Did he try to scratch his nose?”

Irony is easy, thinks Yuri. It won't stop the human computer.

“Scratching his nose—or any other part of his body—wouldn't have been a mistake. He stuck his hand into his pocket. That was a mistake.”

Well done; simple, very plausible. And practically invisible at two hundred or even one hundred meters' distance, even for a man with light-amplification binoculars.

“You hadn't searched him already?”

“There was still a slight risk. I didn't want to chance it.”

“Was he armed?”

Yuri watches the human computer start processing again. Calculate, command, arrange, choose. A second, no longer. The time it takes to draw a breath. A perfectly fluid, invisible process. *It isn't so much hiding what you think matters*, Campbell has often said to him, *it's hiding that you think*. “Don't think” is another of his maxims. Tell the story that could be true. Or, rather, let it tell itself.

“Yes. I found a small needle-shooting pistol with a rotating self-loader, well hidden. He would have killed Yuri and me, and taken Link de Nova and Pluto Saint-Clair to Junkville at gunpoint, where they would have been put into the hands of the gang. Should I draw you a picture?”

Langlois is not the type of man to be easily swayed; he is a real cop, the Man of the Law of Bronze. “What did you do with the weapon?”

Which clearly means: *Give us some concrete proof of your version of the facts*.

But if the sheriff is the Man of the Law of Bronze, a sort of bulldozer who has survived more than his share of mechanical bullfights, Campbell is the human computer—a machine who has beaten all human opponents at chess.

“It's somewhere in the arsenal you've just confiscated, Sheriff. Your men can find it easily.”

Campbell, the calculator of destinies. He has owned that particular weapon for years, and this is why he insisted on fetching his equipment and arsenal from his cabin in Aircrash Circle. He foresaw the grand jury session. He made preparations in the utmost secrecy, not even telling Yuri. He read the sheriff—all of them—perfectly.

A full-out lie, meeting the truth head-on. Clean, well aimed, expertly fired; a bull's-eye, with all the truths and half-lies surrounding it. It shines splendidly, incontrovertible evidence.

Later, after the “grand jury” has ruled on the impossibility of prosecuting a case against them, Yuri catches Wilbur Langlois' gaze as he comes out of the police trailer. His expression is not that of a conquered man; on the contrary, he seems to be holding back a smile of joy.

Yuri catches up with Campbell a short distance away and whispers: “The sheriff didn't really want to accuse us of murder; he didn't want to hear the truth, either. He just wanted us to prove that we were at his level. That not only did we kill that son of a bitch, but that we knew how to get out of it in

front of the Council—how to lie with just enough veracity to *create a truth*. He wanted to know if we're truly worthy of being Guardians of the Territory. He wanted to know if we could kill a man in cold blood, and then lie and camouflage the murder as an act of legitimate defense. He wanted to know how far we're willing to go to protect Link de Nova."

"I hope he understands now that we're willing to go all the way to the end. I hope he understands that no one can stop us. Not even him."

* * *

The woman from space looks at Campbell and says to him: "We think you're the ones that can best help us understand what's going on here. The sheriff's men are too used to it; they rarely leave their own county."

Campbell takes in the woman's height, her blond hair and very pale skin, the slightly up-tilted black eyes suggesting Eurasian cloning genealogy—her whole form, with its somewhat androgynous carriage. Yuri, in turn, watches her companion: reserved, compactly built, muscular, short, naturally steel-gray hair, tawny eyes, dusky skin tanned coppery by the high-orbit sun.

Their complete series names are Sky Lumina O-124 and Orson-Vectro Karel 5727. They talk little, but ask many questions. And there are many more that they *don't* ask.

Not yet, anyway. They are looking. Looking to understand. But to understand what? The Law of the Territory?

Farther away, near Milan Djordjevic's and Paul Zarkovsky's laboratory, Francisco Alpini is lovingly turning the second trailer into an acceptable library. The hammer striking nails, saws cutting metal or Plexiglas, sending up circular sprays of sparks, welding torches soldering steel in an oxyhydric blue gleam, wrenches and screwdrivers squeaking in rusty screws—the machine symphony of Heavy Metal Valley resonates from one pile of crushed metal to the next.

Yuri sees Slade Vernier silently delivering a box of tools to the soldier-monk.

He sees Erwin Slovak chatting, relaxed, near the midnight-blue bus, with the sheriff and a group of deputies—Frank Lecerf, the French sniper; Alex La Varende, an ex-cop from the Quebec Bureau of Investigation, originally from Abitibi; Scot Montrose, a veteran of Canadian intelligence; Antonio

Villalobos, who earned his badge with the Colombian special police; Jane Delorette, a former member of the Ottawa SWAT; Patrick Doyle, a Nova Scotian and ex-GRC lieutenant whose career as a detective spanned Canada before the Fall; Mary-Ann Beaulieu, a cop from the old police department of the city of Montreal; and several others he knows slightly or not at all.

Killers in the service of the Law. Killers in the service of the Territory. Killers in uniform.

The most dangerous kind of all.

He sees the four representatives of the prohibited religious communities speaking joyfully with Father Newman, as they head away from the police station, down Pontiac Alley.

He sees Milan Djordjevic deep in serious discussion with the Professor as they move toward their laboratory-in-construction.

He sees the mother of Link de Nova walking with the old witch from Deadlink, Lady van Harpel, down Cadillac Avenue.

He sees Campbell, sizing up the androids from the Ring.

He sees himself, a fragmented form in a rearview mirror smashed in some lateral collision.

Something is taking shape.

A community.

Undoubtedly the last one worthy of the name in the Territory.

That is to say, not just a simple organic mass of individuals but a specific *metamachine*, a monad, a shared space-time. A possible *world*.

It stands as the still-fragile promise of true hope.

Hope that not only will the “Thing”—which according to Link de Nova has become Humanity itself—fail at self-destructing through the humans that form it but, more importantly, that the humans who survive its undertaking will outlive Humanity itself.

“We really know only one radius that spans the Territory, including Heavy Metal Valley, which will no doubt take you weeks to learn, and weeks more to understand.”

“Can you act as our guides? There isn’t much time.”

“Yuri and I are assigned to a residence until further notice—for ‘security reasons,’ or so the sheriff says, even though we aren’t being officially prosecuted for murder. But I can tell you that there’s no point anymore in

running all over the Territory to understand what's happening. Young Link is right about that, just like his father and the Professor. This is a war between thought and the Thing that wants to destroy it. It is by thinking that we have a chance to defeat this post-human mutation."

Yuri is shocked. What? No *deal*?

"But I need to get out of HVM County. I absolutely have to save my cabin in Aircrash Circle. I've heard from Bob Chamberlain, who just got back from that area, that things aren't good there; the looters will soon be at work, if they aren't already."

"What do you want us to do?" asks the woman from space.

Ah, okay, thinks Yuri, reassured. So there is a deal, an exchange, a negotiation.

"I want you to help me convince Sheriff Langlois to give me safe passage. You would come with me and help me, and in exchange I will show you the hidden side of the Territory, where HVM cops can't go. *The dark side of the Earth.*"

The Community of Heavy Metal, thinks Yuri, this community taking shape, superimposing itself onto old toponymies. The Territory, the county of Grand Junction, HVM.

For a very long time, Heavy Metal Valley has been a sanctuary absolutely free from any unsanctioned intrusion. But for an equally long time, the sheriff has used that freedom to his advantage in every negotiation, every policy. In exchange for ammunition, for raw materials, for machinery and fuel, the sheriff has organized a carefully planned trade in vehicles of all kinds, particularly with Junkville. Periodically, a squadron of police cars takes Nexus Road down to Autostrada, where the exchange takes place with the various techno Triads of Vortex Townships, Neo Pepsico, and Snake Zone.

The Territory has its own laws; those governing commerce are redoubtably simple: nothing can be *bought* in the true sense because monetary standards no longer exist, but *everything is still for sale*—and more expensive than ever. The Law of the Territory is outrageously easy to uphold. What was a market before the Fall is now a hunting ground. The Territory itself is proof that *war is the pursuit of economy by the exact same means*.

“I don’t see how I can agree to your request, Campbell—it doesn’t seem fail-safe to me at all. I’ve already been very understanding with your friend Yuri about his Combi-Cube.”

A barely controlled sigh from Chrysler. The sheriff has made the superhuman effort to agree to transfer Yuri’s small house using a county patrol car.

“Will you authorize me to carry a weapon?”

A very controlled smile from the sheriff. “That isn’t the question.”

“Then what is the fucking question, Sheriff?”

“You’re going to go, you told me, to an isolated region in the south of the Territory, a region with no police force and already ravaged by this ‘mutation.’ You even said yourself that looters are probably active there already. I have to think of the safety of our guests from the Ring.”

He gestures with his chin at the two creatures who are standing together a short distance away, having already pushed their luck with the sheriff.

Yuri thinks: Campbell has proved surprisingly naïve in thinking for a single moment that Langlois would let himself be wheedled into anything by two humanoids from space. But Chrysler isn’t the type to be deterred by such details; now he has taken the situation in hand. He knows Sheriff Langlois—but the sheriff knows him, too. It is by no means an even match: the Fortress against the Trojan Horse; the Law of Bronze against the Secret Order.

“You can’t force everyone to take up residence here, Sheriff. The two androids have a mission to fulfill; they need to understand the *hidden* nature of the Territory—and, with all due respect, Yuri and I are much more competent in that area than your men.”

“Oh yes? Permit me to tell you a little story. Bob Chamberlain just came back from Monolith Hills, and he passed through Junkville early this morning.”

“I know. A veritable exploit indeed,” says Campbell sarcastically.

“Save your irony for a few years from now. Chamberlain was very clear, and several eyewitnesses are backing him up: Men are looking for you all over the Territory. Men from everywhere. A certain Johnson Belfond was mentioned—a nasty hired killer who was a cop in Grand Junction before the Fall. You can’t watch out for yourselves and the Ring androids, too. It’s as simple as that.”

“What do you propose?”

“I’m being very generous with you, Campbell. I’m assigning you an escort. What would you say to Slade Vernier and Erwin Slovak? They’ll be in a second pickup, so you’ll be sure of only having to make one trip.”

“The androids want me to show them the hidden side of the Territory. And you know very well that at the slightest glimpse of a uniform ...”

The sheriff bursts out laughing.

“Campbell! Didn’t you hear what I just said? These men are nipping at your heels. You’re the one at risk of seeing the hidden side of the Territory, from very, very close range.”

“So you’ll authorize us to cross Junkville as far as New Arizona, and then come back up through Deadlink and Neon Park?”

“You won’t do a damned thing except play tour guide, Campbell. The androids have gone all over Grand Junction with our patrols; they’ve even gone to some of the little Ontarian townships like Surveyor Plateau. Listen, I’ll give you permission to go wherever you want, but you will not leave your escort, and you will not do anything stupid trying to lose them. Am I clear?”

“As always, Sheriff.”

“And I’m going to keep your friend Yuri with me, as usual, just to help you avoid temptation.”

“I never expected anything else, Sheriff.”

“So do what you have to do, and try to get back here before nightfall.”

A generous but severe mother, giving her teenage son permission to go out on a Saturday night. Wilbur Langlois, the Mother of HMTV, the Mother of the little surviving primates, the hidden Mother of the Territory.

Yuri watches as Campbell rejoins the android couple and the sheriff heads for his police trailer to fetch his two deputies.

A bit later, as the pickups, with small two-wheeled trailers attached, take off toward the Ridge on the crushed metal-paved road, raising a cloud of blackish dust, Yuri muses that this particular configuration—Campbell, the two HMTV cops, and the two androids from the Ring—would not have been conceivable only a few days ago.

A sense of general order is overtaking all forms, all situations, all consciousnesses, all bodies, all places.

It is not this Third Fall they are trying to combat with all their combined strength. No—it is more like the signaling of a new ontological framework, a new nature. A new *person*?

He walks instinctively down Cadillac Avenue and then cuts through a small transversal alley to Link de Nova's hangar.

He can already feel the electric vibrations of the music, faint as a distant echo of war.

35 > *METAL MACHINE MUSIC*

When they arrive at Aircrash Circle, Campbell immediately becomes aware of several distinct facts:

- 1) The whole zone has been affected, like all the other townships.
- 2) Three necro Triads, including one of the local, ephemeral micro-bands, are milling around various cabins.
- 3) Some scattered looting seems to have taken place.
- 4) His cabin was visibly spared.

All things considered, this is excellent news. The Triads' activities will help disguise their own. And the androids from the Ring can begin to have an idea of what he means by the dark side of the Earth. A real township. The crater of a plane crash. Aircrash Circle.

There are a few corpses scattered in plain sight, but on the whole it is clear that the township is about to be clean. The necro Triads are entering and leaving cabins; stretchers and body bags are filled with clockwork regularity.

Grand Junction, my friends, is nothing compared to what you will see in Junkville. This is just an appetizer.

They park the trucks on either side of the cabin. Campbell is particularly keen to save his form-retaining titanium-composite hangar; he programs it to collapse and fold up, and while they are waiting for the operation to be completed he enlists Slade Vernier and Erwin Slovak to help him disassemble the main parts of the shelter. The two androids ask if they can look around the township. "Stay in sight, that's all I ask," replies Campbell.

Then, he and the two cops stack the parts of the Airbus and the Combi-Cube's panels on the platform and in the trailer of the first pickup, his Ford

Super Duty.

They pause and then move on to the second pickup, the midnight blue Silverado that became so familiar to Chrysler during their exploit in the Notre Dame Mountains. The titanium hangar is almost completely folded now, its mechanism buzzing like a giant insect. They turn their attention to a section of fuselage and the Combi-Cube panels soldered to it.

At that moment, Chrysler notices two new facts, separate in space but parallel in time:

1) There are two Hyundai Tucson SUVs from the 2010s parked side by side at the edge of the woods south of the vast crater. One of the vehicles is painted in the colors of the Clockwork Orange necro Triads, the other an anonymous metallic beige. Men are sitting in the cars; they are not working like the others. They are *watching*.

2) Slade Vernier and Erwin Slovak are also looking at the SUVs, their eyes lit by a very particular fire, a fire Campbell knows by heart. Hunters' fire.

They've been waiting for me, the fuckers. That Silverskin has enough money to hire people who can spend weeks watching my cabin—which also means that he can pay enough to hire people clever enough to track me all the way here. If that is what happened, they're the ones who kept my house from being looted.

"They're going to try and follow us," says Campbell. "I don't think we have a lot of options here."

"Should we lock them up?" Erwin Slovak asks.

Slovak the hunter, talking to Campbell the hunter. Two trap setters. Both men unpredictable because they predict everything.

"No," says Campbell, "we'll have to kill them. They already know way too much."

Slade Vernier cracks a wide smile.

"That's becoming a reflex with you, Campbell. A habit coming back, eh?"

"Do you see any other way? You can tell they've been watching my cabin for days, maybe even a month. The place is rigged; I should have known it. Now they won't let us go. They've seen your uniforms and the

HMV emblem on your car; they know we're working together. And we can't let them tell anyone about it."

If I have to, thinks Campbell, I'll kill them myself.

"After all, we'd just be getting to them before the Thing does," says Slade Vernier thoughtfully.

"Exactly, Mr. Deputy. We'll just look at it as an act of euthanasia."

I am a Camp Doctor, and these men are the last cops in the Territory, men of the Law of Bronze.

Who did you think you were, you poor bastards, to believe you could scare us?

A wall of sound, pure electrical density raised to the level of incandescence, fills the hangar in the middle of which the boy sits, holding a black Gibson Les Paul connected to a citadel of amplifiers of all types.

The sound is millions of kilometers wide, as large as worlds, as bright as a sun gone supernova.

Yuri has never heard anything like it.

A low thumping, like the heartbeat of a pulsar, serves as the main rhythmic structure. Sparkling metallic flashes sheathe the beat—cymbals, remastered by a producer at a cosmic console.

The riff. God, this riff. Like an archetypal condensation of every "Blitzkrieg Bop," every "Interstellar Overdrive," all "Raw Power," every "Bullet the Blue Sky," every huge power source, capable by its very nature of being a supermultiplied metaphor for itself.

It is properly supported by an eighth-note bass line, playing on inverted chords and keynotes, offering the subterranean foundations necessary for its celestial trajectory.

A World, thinks Yuri.

An electroacoustic World.

It isn't a song that he knows. After the final chord has slowly faded away with a growl like that of an airplane engine, he asks Link the question.

The boy smiles at him, his cheeks flushing scarlet.

"This is the first time it's happened to me. It came in a dream, as usual."

"What do you mean? What's different this time?"

"It didn't come from anyone, Yuri."

"From anyone? That's impossible, Link. ..."

Does he mean the Thing? That it is the Thing that ...

"I mean—excuse me, but I mean it came from me. I composed it. And I'm going to ask Judith to write the words."

"Shit, Link; that's really great, you know? A little like Primal Scream, from the *Screamadelica* era."

"There's more, Yuri. Another piece, from two or three days ago. But I have a second one that came together tonight. I've just started decoding it. You want to hear it?"

Later, sitting in a corner of the hangar, Yuri watches Link de Nova put away instruments and power down the main controls on his mixing console.

The second piece was even better than the first, with a rhythm based on a sampling of Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*, on top of which Link laid down a riff broken down into arpeggios and remixed voices from Ligeti's *Atmospheres*, the synthetic bass adding regular punctuation in a funky syncope, a bass-drum "kick" like the echo of a war drum. A digital synthesizer fluttered toward the stars, illuminated with minor chords. It was like something never heard before, and yet full of the quintessence of electronic music. Singularity/generic form.

He's progressing, thinks Yuri. He's assimilating everything he has decoded over the past few years. He's making it his own. He is *individuating* generic rock.

The scope of this realization hits Yuri like a ton of bricks.

"Yuri, there is something else. ... Yuri, are you listening to me?" The voice pierces the depressurized air locks of his thoughts with difficulty.

"What? Something else? Again? I'm listening, Link. Of course."

Of course he is listening. But does Link realize what he is doing?

"I think ... listen, Yuri, I think I'm in the process of finding a way to fight the numeric devolution on a wide scale."

Yuri remains frozen in place, in the liquid helium of the unveiling truth.

Link is individuating the generic form of Machine Language, the Language of Electricity.

The Thing, the Post-Man, the devolutionary mutation, can never individuate except through permanent digital recycling—so it can never individuate.

Yes, but where exactly is the interconnection, the interface, the meeting point?

It seems so obvious that Yuri has to keep himself from laughing. The interface, you idiot, he says to himself. The one right in front of you. This human who is not quite human, but who is not an android, either.

And the human interface in question says: “Before, the problem was that I had to find a single piece, one that already existed, that could resonate with the individual substance of each victim. Now I think it’s different. I have a plan.”

Yuri does not try to hold back his smile. Is Link trying to imitate Chrysler Campbell, the human computer?

“My idea, Yuri, is to fix as many radios as possible, as fast as I can. And to distribute them for free, everywhere we can.”

“Radios?”

“Yes. With Judith’s military station we can broadcast regularly all over the Territory. We will broadcast the music I’m producing.”

Yuri sees the machine come together in his head. Radio Free Territory. The secret Camp Station. Survivors talking to Survivors.

“Radios, fine; the radio transmitter, fine; but how can you be sure that your own music will be more efficient than other people’s?”

Even as he asks the question, Yuri realizes that the answer is there like the prerequisite destroyer.

Link’s music is the music of a man who individuates electricity. Devolving Humanity disindividuates through the organic/numeric network it forms itself.

The Shield of Bronze is a wall of sound bursts, and the one holding it is a boy not quite thirteen years old. The child soldier and his electric guitar.

The Community of Heavy Metal is becoming a reality.

How much of one, he can’t guess.

It is dusk when they leave the hangar. Link has induced Yuri to listen to a recording from his store of covers: “Get It On” by T.Rex; “Initials B.B.” by Serge Gainsbourg; “The Seeker” by The Who; “Stupid Girl” by Garbage; “I Am the Walrus” by The Beatles; “Always Crashing in the Same Car” by David Bowie; “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails and/or Johnny Cash; “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” by Bob Dylan; “Interstellar Overdrive” by Pink Floyd; “Final Solution” by Pere Ubu; “Funtime” by Iggy Pop; “Dancing with Myself” by Billy Idol; “2,000 LightYears from Home” by the Rolling

Stones; “She Sells Sanctuary” by The Cult; “Warm Leatherette” by The Normal; “Dazed and Confused” by Led Zeppelin; “Ladytron” by Roxy Music ...

What strikes the ear first is the VOICE. Link de Nova’s voice takes on a tonality that has nothing to do with the adolescent he is. It does not imitate anyone; it is totally singular—but it is not his voice—or, rather, realizes Yuri, it is his voice, but twenty years from now. For Link, even in the biophysical sense, time does not follow the same linear process as it does for us.

Yuri smiles at him. “If I could make an album of covers, if the world still existed, I would choose these songs, and I would probably call the record *Discoveries from the Territory*.”

Yes, he thinks, Link is the answer to this devolving Post-Humanity, which in the end is only continuing the Metastructure’s work of enslavement, except that it is enslaving itself. Link is the last chance for true humans, because he is neither natural nor artificial; he is beyond either of them. He is the hope for survival of the last true men, because he knows how to cause electricity to be reborn in machines, and in human bodies.

And electronic music—the act of electricity performing as a work of art, as a *printing machine of singularities*—the electronic music of Link de Nova will be for the Thing what daylight is to vampires, and what the light of a star-filled night is to those who don’t know how to see it.

They are walking along Cadillac Avenue when they hear the noise of engines behind them.

It is Campbell’s expedition, returning to the fold.

Yuri can see that the beds and trailers of the two pickups are full to capacity. Oh no, strange, the Silverado’s is missing. And the two vehicles seem to have been in more than one collision—an accident? The fenders are smashed, outside mirrors shattered, bumpers bent and bashed in.

When Campbell gets out of the car, Yuri can see on his face the dark, singular expression of a man who knows too much.

“What happened?” he demands.

“Come back with me to the Travelaire and I’ll explain everything to you in detail. But I brought 90 percent of the cabin back with me.”

Until now, the Ford Travelaire mobile home has been their temporary refuge. Kindly loaned by the community of Humvee, it has been partially opened on one side and joined to the small towable Combi-Cube Yuri

brought from Snake Zone with the sheriff's discreet approval a few days before; they have barely had the time to fit it out. When the parts of Campbell's newly recovered hybrid cabin are attached to this ensemble, they will have a perfect replica of their place at Aircrash Circle, and even better: an additive synthesis of their two personal shelters. Nothing is created in the Territory, but neither does it really transform. Everything moves. Everything moves faster and faster. Until the inevitable collision.

Everyone in the expedition is back safely, but Yuri can see that the pair of androids seems profoundly disturbed, while the two cops are conversing as calmly as anything.

He can guess why.

"They wanted to see the hidden side of the Territory, and they saw it," says Campbell, with the cool impassivity so particular to him.

Oh yes, thinks Yuri, without even knowing the details of what happened. Men died in the Territory this afternoon, and not from the numeric mutation.

The dark side of the Earth. The androids from the Ring wanted to visit *the dark side of the Earth.*

They made a good choice. Chrysler Campbell is in every way the ideal guide for that sort of excursion.

It is not until the next day that Yuri can hear from Campbell's mouth exactly what happened in Aircrash Circle. The previous night, he asked Yuri to give him a hand parking the Silverado and unloading it first, so the cops could have it back as soon as possible.

"What happened to the trailer?" Yuri had asked, by way of beginning the conversation.

"I'm exhausted, Yuri. Let's unload their damned Chevy and then I'm going to bed. I'll tell you everything tomorrow morning when we deal with our pickup."

Campbell always keeps his promises, even when it comes to killing a man. And even when it comes to relating the circumstances of that killing.

The next morning, they are pulling stacks of metal from the Ford Super Duty's trailer when Yuri says:

"Did you trap them the usual way?"

"No," answers Campbell, his cool gaze fixed on the other side of the pile of cement-and-steel plates. "No, we didn't trap them."

Yuri makes a surprised noise.

“The Territory itself is a trap, you know, for people who know how to make it work.”

“What did you make work?”

“Do the details really matter? Just know that their bodies—four of them—are sunk deep in Lake Champlain, where they’ll have some company. Their cars, two of them, are at the bottom of a ravine near Neon Park, where they’ll have company, too. There, now; that’s what I’d call a tidy summary.”

Yuri closes his eyes for a moment. Campbell, too, is always learning; Campbell, the human computer. Not only can he beat any man at chess, he has probably surpassed all electronic machines in his ability to kill *Homo sapiens*.

Yuri finds out the details soon enough, without even having to question his friend. They come out in snippets as they work. Toward early afternoon the foundations of the new cabin are in place, and Yuri knows what happened, and when, and where, and why.

“You know Neon Park? We didn’t try to lose them. On the contrary, we played with them; we drove to Row 280 north of the city, and then to Nexus Road and then back, on Row 281, just a block over. The guys followed us from a distance, using binoculars, so we put on some speed to excite them a little, make the chase more plausible.”

And a few pieces of the Airbus later: “You know the big boulder on Row 281, almost on the lakeshore? It’s to the left of the road and there’s a pretty navigable path just behind it, at the top of a long slope that leads to the western shore, and on the other side there’s a very narrow strip, lightly wooded, and then some deep ravines. It was simple.”

And after the transfer of several large slabs of Recyclo-cement: “The slope curves slightly there; it’s a dream spot. We stopped just before the bend and unhitched the trailer from the Silverado as fast as we could, and left it right in the middle of the road. Then we took the small path and got behind the butte.”

With several panels of the Combi-Cube joined to sections of fuselage: “Then, simple. Imagine it—they got out of their Hyundais, engines running, which drowned out our approach, and two of them started looking through the contents of the trailer—I don’t know, to see if it was booby-trapped,

maybe. The two others were just standing on the side of the road, by their car, keeping watch—but they didn't see me or Vernier, even though I can tell you the road is extremely narrow at that point."

Another piece of fuselage later, with part of the cockpit still attached: "We attacked from behind. Vernier drove completely off the road, right near the boulder—right up against it; I'm telling you, sparks were flying—and mowed the first two right down; smashed into the trailer on his way. He's a real master, that one. In the meantime I cut through the little wooded area on the right and bashed into the second car's rear fender; I got the second two guys out my window when they came out of the car."

Panels of sheetrock, parpens, firebricks—and the sound of destruction in Yuri's ears. *Metal Machine Music* in the midst of neonature, in the middle of a deserted row, in the middle of nowhere. The shriek of steel scraping on rock, the symphony of tearing sheet metal and Plexiglas exploding on impact and the screaming of tires; the majestic chant of highspeed collisions, the rhythmic percussion of gunfire; powder, steel, sparks. Death, armor-clad.

"Vernier tossed me his .357 Magnum, the one from L'Amiante County. The two guys got hit by a mass of rubble and caught in a Y-crossfire at the same time. Their chances dropped to less than absolute zero. As for the two Vernier smashed with his pickup—neither of them was in one piece after that. There was one semidecapitation and a forearm we couldn't find. There was nothing they could do against us."

Four men who didn't have the slightest chance. Four men who crossed paths with Chrysler Campbell and a couple of Territory cops.

Four men who earned the right to euthanasia improvised to perfection by a Camp Doctor.

The androids certainly found the dark side of the Earth.

Campbell looks at Link de Nova as the deep, saturated half-bass hums, nudging the limits of the Larsen effect, and fades slowly away in the static electricity-charged silence. Diodes blink on various machines; the volometers on the mixing console drop gradually toward zero; the black Les Paul is still vibrating, held by its neck by a boy whose quasi-ecstatic expression suggests that his soul is flying in pursuit of the jets of electricity launched beyond the aluminum walls and into the twilight sky, where the

first stars, summoned by the music, are surging from the depths of the Earth.

Metal Machine Music, thinks Yuri. Link is going to become the loudspeaker for the poetry of the Camp, the secret bard of the Territory, the vector of the electric machine-turned-serious work transcending itself via the infinity of which it is secretly made, the starfire guitarist, the guitarist of the ultraviolet night. Beauty against the Beast.

“Well, I don’t know if that will help us fight the digital mutation, but at least we’ve got a true sonic weapon now. We can make eardrums explode from kilometers away.”

No one laughs at Chrysler’s joke but him.

“Campbell,” Yuri says, “don’t you understand what I told you on the way over here? We’re going to need hundreds—thousands—of radio transmitters.”

“I get it, Yuri; I’m not an idiot. The problem is that the system hasn’t been tested. And that goes against my ethics.”

“Tested?”

“Yes, Yuri, like we did with the old Hells Angel from Electra Glide.”

“The sheriff won’t let us leave the county for that kind of operation anymore, Chrysler, and you know it. He won’t let us go very far away for any reason.”

“Of course I know it. That’s why I don’t think this solution will fly.”

“We don’t have a choice, Chrysler. It comes down to that, really. The sheriff can’t do anything, and neither can the fuckers chasing us on the outside. It isn’t about Link’s physical presence anymore—it’s his music we’re going to transmit. And I can promise you that we don’t need any more scientific tests.”

“Oh, really? So we’re proceeding in a scientific manner, but without the experimental phase. That’s new.”

“We’re beyond experimental science, Chrysler. Haven’t you said yourself that it’s through *thought* that we’re going to defeat this Thing?”

Silence, static electricity, the final infrasonic vibrations of the wall of amplifiers.

“Fine,” says Campbell finally, sighing. “Radio transmitters. We’ll ask the sheriff to get them during his next trading session with Junkville. Anything else?”

Yuri smiles, relieved. Campbell is going to help them. He will manage to convince the sheriff. He will give Link a chance to fight for real against the new Humanity.

“No,” Yuri replies. “Thank you for—”

“Yes,” interrupts the boy. “There is something else.”

With Link, Yuri thinks, there is *always* something else—best not to forget that again.

“An android? But what android are you talking about, Link?”

Campbell’s astonishment is visibly mingled with annoyance. It is rare to see him lose his cool. A product of accumulation, no doubt.

“Campbell, do you know the phenomenon called neuroquantum correlation?”

“I studied at MIT, Link. Of course I know the phenomenon.”

“Okay. Well, the android builders never managed to find out where it came from; it was never part of the program.”

“A by-product.”

“Exactly. Except that I’m starting to wonder if this by-product doesn’t have something to do with the mysteries of the fourth generation.”

“Mysteries? What mysteries?”

“Well—for example, how these androids have individual personalities that have nothing to do with the cortical parameters implanted in the embryogenesis incubators.”

“You think that’s related to correlation?” asks Yuri.

“Yes—everything is always related in machines—but also connected by disjunction. Don’t forget that every machine is a network of disconnections.”

“Right. Now, then, what did you want to tell us about this android threatening the whole Territory?”

“My mother *feels* it, Chrysler. And yesterday she told me she’s been speaking about it quite a bit with the androids from the Ring. They feel it, too. They told her they’ve felt its presence since they landed.”

“Who is this android? Where does it come from?”

“They don’t know; that’s why they’re looking all over the Territory—as best they can, anyway. They’re trying to track it down.”

Campbell cracks a smile. He is being looked for by Vegas Orlando's and Silverskin's gang, and the androids are looking for another artificial human, and the two chases collided in Aircrash Circle. It is a place destined for such collisions. For all collisions.

His gaze meets Yuri's for a fraction of a second—always their instantaneous semitelepathy; evidently, they have the same gift as the androids.

Of course. It's obvious. Yuri is right.

Campbell's face shows the dawning of a terrible truth, an incalculable danger.

"The androids can't be allowed to leave the county at all anymore. I'll talk to the sheriff about it tonight."

"Why not? They haven't caused any problems yet, as far as I know."

Link, in vigorous opposition, looks to Yuri for support.

But Yuri knows Campbell is right. Yuri knows why they absolutely cannot leave Heavy Metal Valley again. Yuri knows there is no other solution.

"The androids' neuroquantum correlation works in all directions, Link. If this artificial human is fourth-generation, as it appears to be, according to your mother and the people from the Ring, then it senses them, too. It can identify them, locate them, track them. Trace them *here*."

"I know, Yuri. My mother explained it to me last night. There's nothing to be done about it; she told me it would inevitably end up knowing where they are. But it will be reciprocal."

Campbell smiles his carnivorous smile. "Nothing is reciprocal in the Territory, Link. Ever. It's the Law. Nothing can be done to prevent it from knowing where your mother and the astronauts are, but nothing can keep us from finding it and *shutting it up*, either."

With Link, there is always something else. With Campbell, there is always a definitive conclusion.

Whatever the origins and motivations of this newly arrived android may be, it is not a man of the Territory, a Guardian of the Law of Bronze, a Camp Doctor.

And, Yuri thinks: *That makes it even more dangerous.*

Maybe even more dangerous than us.

Which borders on the infinite.

36 > *BIG AUDIO DYNAMITE*

It is the Spring of the Thousand Radios. Sheriff Langlois has used his contacts to spread the word all over Junkville. A convoy of two dozen vehicles is descending on HMV for a huge swap, a special promotion, a huge pre-summer sale.

In exchange for Cadillacs, Pontiacs, Toyotas, Buicks, Subarus, Fords, GMCs, Oldsmobiles, Hondas, Suzukis, Chryslers, Dodges, Plymouths, Kias, and Jeeps, he is asking only radio equipment of all generations—microprocessors, transistors, vacuum tubes, galena tubes, vapor tubes, even radios that are not currently in working order, but are complete in terms of internal components. Corpses, maybe, but with all their organs.

The sheriff is displaying a caravan of twenty-four vehicles. He is asking the techno Triads for one thousand radios per car.

“We’ll never be able to find so many transistors in the whole Territory in so little time. Most of them are incomplete, recycled.”

One man shows a stock of transistors piled in several pickups. “Since your announcement we’ve been able to gather a little more than five thousand. But our townships are empty.”

“You won’t believe this,” answers Langlois, “but HMV is ready to give credit. How much time would you need?”

The head of the Union of Techno Triads consults briefly with his colleagues. “We think we can get the twenty-four thousand radios in about sixteen weeks. Frankly, to do it in any less time would be very difficult. Let’s say six thousand per month. Will that work for you?”

Langlois cracks a wide smile. “If you have six thousand radios with you in four weeks we’ll consider it a done deal. I’ll give you six complete vehicles for your first delivery, as a little present on the house. HMV might give you credit, but not philanthropy. I hope I’m making myself perfectly clear to everyone.”

The sheriff has been so clear that a field mouse could understand him, or a stone lying on the side of the road.

The Spring of Waves, the Spring of Electric Flowers, the Spring of Living Machines.

The Community of Heavy Metal is growing its own jungle against the ever-expanding desert. Only steel can stop the sand. Only metallurgy, only the science of fire can fight the ice. Only electric waves will be able to combat neonature.

Here is the weapon. Zoo Station, as Link de Nova has nicknamed it, after an old U2 song.

Zoo Station: I'm ready, I'm ready for the gridlock, I'm ready, to take it to the street, I'm ready for the shuffle, ready for the deal, ready to let go of the steering wheel, I'm ready, ready for the crush.

Yes, we are ready. Ready to let the car go until the collision, ready for the great Brownian movement, ready for the global roasting, ready for the final crash. Radio Heavy Metal, Radio Territory Fortress, Radio Free Americanada, Thousand Roll-ins Radio, Grand Dynamite Audio, the Station of the Human League. Beep beep, beep beep—the royal *Sputnik* orbiting above the desolate Earth, subject to the dialectic of the desert of sand/desert of ice; yes, listen to that fuckin' noise, listen to that beat, the squadron of sonic Stormoviks razing the tanks in flames above the horizontal/total universe of the War of the Worlds, the War of the Plans, the War of the Numbers, because we are Zoo Station, Radio Free Territory, Grand Dynamite Audio, Survivors Radio, the Radio of What Lives in the Camp, the Radio of What Is About to Kill Death.

The Black Death, Death reversed in an act of Justice, Justice that is going to lodge a bullet in the skull of the Grim Reaper.

We are ready. We are ready, dirty bitch.

Night broadcast: Here is the Resistance of the stars in the ultraviolet sky. The Living talking to the Living.

There are now more than six thousand working radios distributed throughout the Territory.

Against all expectations, Link has managed to find a unique method of individuation for the simplest electric machines; he can now heal them in

blocks, by “species,” in only a day or two. All they have to do is transmit from the station on the right wavelength, and his music does the rest in a few seconds, two or three minutes at most; the radio crackles and spits out some interference, then adjusts to the frequency, and the sound miracle occurs. Now they know it, their plan of action.

It is the Strategy of the Territory, the Strategy of the Law of Bronze, the Strategy of Starfire.

Radio Free Territory, Zoo Station, has now been transmitting for almost a month. The results have exceeded all their hopes. There is talk of thousands of remissions, the alphanumeric devolution is stopping, and, even better, it appears that Radio Free Territory is able to efficiently combat the still-sensitive effects of the second mutation on programmable machines and bionic systems.

Link de Nova’s solution is working because it attacks the root of evil directly; it cuts not only the heads of the Gorgon but also what produces them; it cleanly severs the spinal cord. It does not simply strike off the heads, it slices into the spirit of the Beast; it divides the Great Divider.

Oh yes, listen to that fuckin’ noise, listen to that beat, dirty bitch.

The two androids are working as well. Their technical knowledge has been of great assistance in turning the hangar into a truly functional recording studio coupled with a radio transmitter of great power.

Judith tried weakly to argue when the two beings from Space made her part of their project, but she could not hold out long in the face of such implacable rationality come from the fiery stars, in the face of the singular economy to which they bore witness. The radio station needs to be directly coupled to the “production center” in the hangar; its antenna is placed directly on the structure’s roof.

In orbit, as in the rest of the Territory, you don’t move unless you have taken the utmost precautions and done systematic research to ensure minimal energy consumption—but in Space, there is no space.

In orbit, as in the Territory, you must constantly improvise to hold together ever-changing configurations—but in Space, the machines move.

In orbit, everything moves, all the time, and everything is constantly transforming—just as in the Territory, except for nature itself. The difference is notable.

Radio Free Territory is calling. Zoo Station is calling, do you hear me, Terra-Man?

Do you hear me, Major Tom?

Guitars-rockets/speaker-meteors/ultrasonic stridencies of imploding steel/bursting uranium at critical mass/stratospheric fissionable materials quivering in lightning-filled altocumulus/atomic light from Bikini Island launches/the twentieth century in an electric Middle Age/turboreactors at full blast. We are transmitting, thinks Yuri; we haven't stopped transmitting, day or night, for three weeks and some change; we are radiating all over the Territory, our electromagnetic waves are reaching almost ten thousand people; they have already healed and immunized half of them, at least.

Just a few days have brought a fundamental change.

An entire era is ending.

The time of secrets, the time of mystical treaties, the time of the ultraviolet night itself.

It has come with us until this point; it has permitted us to reach the end.

We have to tell it good-bye. As one says good-bye to a dead soldier on a mountainside.

Now we are acting in broad daylight. The day of the Camp Doctors.

The sheriff and his convoy return at the end of the afternoon with another six thousand various types of radios in their pickups. They conducted the swap at the usual place, on the border between Autostrada and Vortex. The exchange took place with the speed of a dialogue between predators. There is an excellent reason for this. The union head has warned the sheriff that:

"We've collected absolutely all there is to collect. There can't be even a World War One-era Pathé-Marconi left in the Territory; we've been all the way to New Arizona. We can't come up with any more, Sheriff Langlois; we're sorry. These are the last six thousand radios in the Territory."

The Triad guys have no reason to lie; at the worst, they might have tried to renegotiate. They have swept the Territory clean. They started with their own areas, from Vortex Townships to Clockwork Orange, from Big Bag Recyclo to Tin Machine, from Snake Zone to Carbon City. Then they widened their circles of investigation, like the birds of prey they are.

They have all of them. They now have *all* the radios in the Territory.

Twelve thousand radios, muses Yuri. Radio Free Territory. Territory of the free radios.

Twelve thousand radios; around one for every thirty inhabitants. That should be enough.

It's funny; the Territory has the same number of books as it does radio receivers, all of them portable machines destined to *write in you*.

Yuri watches the sheriff and his deputies unloading the thousands of small devices on the central esplanade of Bulldozer Park.

Campbell joins him in silence, sitting down beside him.

He has something important to tell me, thinks Yuri. He seems worried—but everything is going fantastically isn't it?

He mentions, casually, that operations are proceeding well.

"That's just it; I don't like it. The Thing has never let itself be defeated so easily. Never forget the rule of the Territory: *If your attack goes perfectly, it's an ambush.*"

Vernier, Slovak, Chamberlain, Lecerf, Schutzberg, and La Varende, as well as the Scot Montrose and the Colombian Villalobos, a half dozen other deputies, and the soldier-monk Francisco Alpini, are sorting the radios according to their "species"—that is, their technological generation. Soldiers creating Land Art in a place where the land is nothing now but a general simulation.

Yuri sees Milan Djordjevic, Professor Zarkovsky, the two androids from the Ring, and even Link de Nova's mother, accompanied by her old friend Lady van Harpel, the geomancer, gathering at the edge of the tarmac, waiting for the radio station to use Link as its biological antenna.

Because that is what is happening, they have discovered together—the Professor, Milan Djordjevic, Yuri, Campbell, and even Judith Sevigny, who arrives surrounded by her dazzling aura of superhuman beauty.

It was the beings from the Ring who first perfectly verbalized the concept:

"It must be due to a very profound mutation in his genetic code. Up there in the Ring, we know that DNA is a sort of antenna."

"An antenna?" the Professor had asked.

"Yes. That was part of the research prohibited by the Metastructure for reasons of 'ethical vigilance.' You couldn't access it during your own investigations, I imagine."

"And Link could be an antenna?"

“Yes. His DNA, or rather his metacode, what some people called ‘junk DNA’ before the Fall, around 97 percent of the human genome, is configured at the time of birth according to its ultimate schema. Link is an electromagnetic transmitter-receiver, and even better, he can assemble and reassemble quarks and other elementary particles.”

“Except that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, at least not exactly. Not yet, anyway,” the female android had added.

So let’s go, listen to that fuckin’ noise baby, listen to that beat. The radios click on, one after the other, as Radio Free Territory, Zoo Station, transmits on its frequency, the frequency of Grand Dynamite Audio, 1001 MHz, and Link de Nova stretches his hands toward the little machines lined up in large groups in front of him.

Link de Nova, the biological antenna. The living man/machine interface.

They all start to work, one by one, block by block, by “species” and by “individual;” with a deep electrical hum, one of his latest digitally recorded pieces resonates across the Bulldozer Park tarmac:

WELCOME TO THE TERRITORY: Welcome to the Territory, you enter the zone of the final floor, welcome to my home, baby, its name is the Brave New World, welcome to the Territory, we are not dead anymore, welcome to the dome, my friend, do not search for any window, any door.

It is a sort of warning; the words are both strange and welcoming, like the placards posted at city gates in the ancient, mythic Far West. The sense of caution mingles naturally with this “second sense” that is not one. This sense that is apparently identical, but with the infinitesimal distance of irony, thrown in the very face of the Thing. This Thing that has no face.

We are the Human League taking up arms against devolutionary Post-Humanity. We are the deputies of the sheriff-Territory, the bodyguards of the Library. We are the principle of individuation that will fight with all its strength against the mass phenomenon of substance and concept.

Nominalism. He asked for numerous explanations of it from Djordjevic and the Professor as they spent days carefully arranging their thousands of books on the metal shelves the Italian soldier-monk built for them.

He has begun to read. A little randomly, but motivated by dazzling intuition. This English theologian’s *principle of individuation*, which the two men won’t stop talking about. *The Treatise of God as First Principle.* A

certain Saint Bonaventure and his weighty speculations on the Trinity and, later, Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Against Averroës* and a book by a Monsieur Étienne Gilson on the subject of a very ancient Christian master named Saint Bernard and his notion of *oneness*. The reading seems disorderly and he knows it, but he also knows that the chaos is preliminary to a terrible explosion.

He is like a radio, brought suddenly back to life by a nonhuman Link de Nova, or rather by the written traces of these few humans who, like Link, fought against the schism between Revelation and Science centuries ago.

The first point, Djordjevic told him, for Duns Scotus and for Saint Bonaventure, is the connection of concept, as the product of intelligence, with sensible experience, via the intermediary of our organs of perception, which is the fundamental doctrine of Aristotle's knowledge, not to mention the Teachings of the Scriptures, Revelations, and thus the Nature of the human spirit made in the image of God. For Scotus, who openly drew inspiration from Saint Bonaventure, the relationship between man and the Absolute rests on Freedom, on gratuitousness—on, in a word, Grace, which cannot be rationally inferred, according to Aristotle's scale of categories, all the way to his "Primary Engine."

"I say that our science, theology, is not subordinate to any other, even though its subject, the Infinite Being, is in a sense included in the subject of the philosophy, which is of the Being in general; it receives no principle from it.' That is from the Prologue of the *Ordinatio*," Djordjevic said, handing him the book. "Never forget that for Scotus, God Himself, the infinite, one *and* triune, was an *absolutely singular* and *singularly absolute* being.

"Modern rationalism was born at that time, when people began to return to the concepts of Aristotle by an already-somewhat-nominalist Arab-Islamist detour, though Scotus continued to claim 'Saint Paul, *our* Philosopher.' It was this type of conception that Scotus fought with all his energy, in the same vein as Saint Thomas Aquinas, who reached the goal of mechanizing the human spirit and then the antimechanical inversion we have known since the Fall."

Of course, thinks Yuri.

How could they split knowledge and beauty, the truth of its emergence, its *physicality*? Didn't they realize what they were doing, what they were bequeathing to the men of the future? How could they deny the Universals

under the pretext that Scotus had succeeded in containing the infinite nature of the individual, and the anti-Aristotelian possibility of making the singular an authentic subject of knowledge? In the Prologue of the *Ordinatio*, he finds the concepts that seem to him the basis for everything at work in the world.

WELCOME TO THE TERRITORY: I am the silver star shining on the Kevlar chest, I am the iron law right above you in the skies, I am the last good day and I am the passed good-bye, I am the great division without any rest.

The nominalists, who reclaimed a number of the concepts of Averroës and the monopsychists, engendered—perhaps without knowing it—the thriving reign of the Technical World, having fallaciously and inversely deduced from Scotus’s theories that any knowledge of the Universals was impossible, and that only the knowledge of individual entities existed.

Suddenly, what made “Socrates” not only “a man” but “that particular man,” that indivisible singularity—what Scotus called “haecceity,” from the Latin *haec*, “that particular thing”—making each thing different from all others, became the simple definition of parameters of a “material reality,” but one rendered “intelligible,” as Aristotle had seen it, by the organs of sensorial perception. The being Socrates instantaneously lost all unitary principles. He became an infinitely divided indivisible.

The point was: *There is nothing truly distinct about Socrates that makes him a man, but there is something formally distinct. Consequently, Humanity is not a distinct reality of the men who incarnate it in themselves, who individuate it. But there is a formally distinct reality, what Scotus called “formalitas,” which permits us to establish without any possibility of doubt the belonging of Socrates to the human race.* The distinction may have been subtle, but it was fundamental.

Because Scotus thus put ontology back into the perspective of a *predominance of will*, in the Christian sense of charity and *in actu* knowledge. He permitted it to be reformulated according to a unity-meaning-act axis that preserved metaphysical uniqueness at the same time as the reality of the multiplicities of the world. The formal difference, the *formalitas*, was precisely what constituted the formal unity of individuals; it coordinated meaning, unity, *and* difference; it was a principle found in the

mathematical theory of graphs, permitting the preservation of unity in any multiplicity.

For Scotus, the singular was not an unknowable “in itself” in the manner of the Kantian “thing in itself,” because it was *intelligible by nature*. By which, he claimed, our knowledge is an ontic dynamic in the direction of always singularized characteristics that themselves “marked”—according to Scotus—the indivisible singularity, at once indivisible and infinite, of the beings themselves that bear these characteristics in unique versions.

Welcome to the Territory, baby

Welcome to where Mankind is ending

Welcome to the Territory baby

I’ve waited for you since the beginning.

All human singularities connected to the fire of the ultraviolet stars, to the horizon of sand and ice, humanity conceived as an infinity of variations of the Unique, the World as a globe of brilliant light of which the human body is the filament; the sky, the earth, the waters—all is illuminated.

Everything in an individual, said Duns Scotus, *is individuated, and thus infinite*. It is this infinity that “marks” its singularity. And it is because it is undivided that it is the ultimate abstractor, that it divides all the rest: genera, species, forms, matter, substances. Yet Scotus knew how to avoid the error: individuality and indivisibility do not completely match; or, rather, there is a “rapport of relationship” between them, based on two types of differences. To start: a genus can be divided into its parts, species, which are generically identical. A species, in its turn, divides into its parts, individuals, which are specifically identical, but it is impossible to divide an individual into subjective parts—that is, into numerically identical parts having the same individuality as the individual. Yet this “indivision” can be broken down into various “physical” constituents: substance, matter, activity, form, mass. Thus, while being ontologically one, an individual contains *different realities*, and it is impossible to disassociate in him what comes from human nature and what is singular, particular, *personal* to him. Scotus shined a light on the place where the being is intelligible, on *the point of disjunctive synthesis between two singularities*: that of God, and that of concrete beings, that of these ultimate differentiators. The singular is not totally knowable in itself; a blurred area, a “mystery,” blocks the process of

cognition at a certain stage, but it is precisely on this mystery that the individual is based, and it is in being located at the level of singularity that a being becomes intelligible. For Scotus, the singularity of God was His infinity.

What individuates in man is thus nothing other than the always singular and always unique, and thus infinite, image of God.

Welcome to the Territory, don't expect any first chance

Welcome to my home, baby, stay cool, play dead, get ready

Welcome to the Territory, the earth is black like a Clockwork Orange

Welcome to my home, baby, you will sing your electric body.

Everything is so beautiful in this end of the world; he realizes that everything, *by nature*, is illuminated; there is no “accident” in light, which is neither material nor immaterial, but a synthetic state between existence and nonexistence; photons have no mass, and yet they act and are subject like other bodies to the laws of gravity, as Einstein demonstrated around 1900. Light is an eminent paradox that harks to all those who are at work in the Incarnation. Light is an active, performing metaphor; it is the visible manifestation of the Word.

And his brain is aflame under the fiery sky.

For the nominalists, a man was nothing but the “accidental” union of material form and material substance. The spirit itself was simply a particular variation of the schema.

By all indications, they did not understand the subtle difference Scotus made between real difference and formal difference. For orthodox “realists,” Socrates is a man because he carries within him the human essence, Humanity. Humanity is different from Socrates and it “really” exists as such. And it is through this Humanity he carries that Socrates is a man. This is the basic, classical Aristotelian-Platonic position.

Nominalists held a typically opposing position, as enunciated by William of Ockham: only individuals exist. Nothing exists outside of Socrates that is different from Socrates, or that makes Socrates a man. “Universals” are only concepts, words.

Duns Scotus found a solution that seemed “midline” at first view, but that in our eyes is a complete form of “heterodox realism,” an authentic “metaphysical realism,” as Djordjevic and the Professor put it to him.

Scotus succeeded in establishing a true synthesis between Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure, which, if it had been understood, would have let us avoid everything that has happened since, and especially what we are living through today, insofar as the word life still has any meaning in this world.

It is no accident that the theologians of the Franciscan school, like Scotus, fought violently with the nominalists on the subject of the Trinity. While the latter, waking from ancient heresies, denied the Trinity, invoking the principle of noncontradiction to affirm that if there were three “names” there were subsequently three distinct entities, emphasizing the broken link between word and thing of which they were the precursors, Scotus, with his “formal distinction,” successfully shot down the opposing position on a “philosophical” plan, while still relying on theology explicitly based on Revelations and not on the “finitist” concepts of the Aristotelians: *“In the divine essence, there are real distinctions. These distinctions cannot be in the divine essence itself due to its unitary simplicity, but between the subsistent realities that are, however, of a single substantial nature. These subsistent realities in the unity of substance are people. People are truly distinct among themselves, though truly identical in substance.”*

The Tri-Unity: the three hypostases of the unified divine nature summed up in a few lines, like a sort of navigation report for the use of far-distant future generations.

Lines that have been forgotten, and that are difficult to understand on first reading; it seems that between 1300 and the twenty-first century, human intelligence has regressed a great deal, and that we have done all we can to make that happen.

Welcome to the Territory, every soul is trapped between murder and treachery, welcome to the Territory, digital numbers put the flesh into the market race, you’ll see what is now the local living money, welcome to the Territory, baby, no doubt it is your lucky day.

It is a dead component that a force of unknown origin causes to work again, it is an organ coming back to life in the acoustic crystal of music that falls from the sky, becoming more and more dazzling with every instant, containing the fire of a million suns.

Scotus knew how to avoid the second mistake: not being divisible into subjective parts, not being identical to another seemed to be the sine qua non conditions of any definition of individuation; this was the thesis of “double negation” by the French theologian Henry of Ghent, who had already caused a number of Saint Thomas Aquinas’s proposals to be condemned by the University of Paris in 1277.

Against the first negation, Scotus very subtly pointed out that *not being divided was not the same as being indivisible*—since specifically, the “rapport of relationship” articulating the physics of the process of individuation involves, in addition to the two differentiating modalities (formal and material), the gap between actual division and potential division—*actualized being and potential being*. The fundamental difference between Aristotelian numeric infinity and Scotus’s ontological infinity was that the first was never anything but “potential infinity,” always being postponed, indefinitely, by the “potential” adding of a number to the series, while the second was true infinity, completely *actualized*, an infinity of which every part, even the most infinitesimal, was infinite, and to which absolutely nothing could be added because it WAS EVERYTHING.

In addition, Scotus demonstrated that though a material substance could be divided into several numerically different substances (a rock can be broken into several pieces, each of which will continue to belong in the category of “rock”), it could not be divided into numerically identical substances (none of the pieces is identical to the others and none can be identical to the original rock). From that, he drew the conclusion that this property was “negentropic,” to apply a concept to it taken from quantum physics, since “nothing is absolutely incompatible with the nature of a being due to privation, but rather through something positive within it.” In other words, the indivisibility of a substance into subjective parts is an absolute, and not a default. Again, man is singularized in the image of God, in a relationship of rapport between the Unique and the Multiple, which permits the emergence (*phusys*) of Infinity.

Welcome to the Territory, recycling the Infinity, welcome to my home, baby, welcome to the Singularity.

The radio station of the Electric Middle Ages, the music of machines replying to forgotten theologians. The cosmodrome is speaking to cathedrals. The sky is becoming more and more luminous over his head.

Scotus fought even more ferociously against the second negation: “*Nothing can be formally turned by negation into an entity more perfect than the one that existed before this negation.*” Primary nature already being at the highest point, one can add nothing to it by saying that is not this or that thing, because these predicates cannot, by definition, add anything to it. In addition, since nothing can be predicated negatively in a being of the “non-man” type, because nothing can be affirmed other than a tautology such as “a non-man is a non-man,” we find ourselves faced with *ex absurdo* proof of the nonexistence of Nothingness.

Thus for Scotus, the process of individuation, the unique entity produced by the singularity of each man, corresponded to the fact that “all created substances will be immediately active by virtue of the principle composed of the real relationship between God and the created,” which implies a unique, singular, *actual* relationship. For Scotus, an individual was the indivisible attribution of real, individual difference to human nature. An individual was a “monad,” a material point at once physical and metaphysical, situated on a line of *disjunctive synthesis* but not closed according to Leibniz’s model, and so open, or rather “interfaced” with other “superphysical” points like it.

Welcome to the Territory, baby, welcome to where the secret rules, welcome to the Territory, baby, you’re the angel who must fall here.

The brain is a burning chamber where knowledge is the fuel that permits the truth to become a true source of ontic energy; it is no longer only the skies, the waters, and the emerging land that are irradiated; it is not the entire world that seems to be sun-drenched in a single moment. Everything is identically illuminated inside him with the same intensity.

Everything is alive in the infiniteness of its multiples, but everything extends beyond its physical form toward the absolute infinity of the One. He has never been so filled with joy by the understanding of an “abstract” problem. It is a joy unlike any other, the very joy of kindling fire.

Who, then, managed to correlate the metaphysical intuitions of Scotus and the mathematical ones of the brilliant Russian-born German Cantor, six centuries later? Who dared to accomplish such a feat? Who remembered that Cantor called the first number of his transfinite series “aleph,” after first having chosen “omega” and then realizing his mistake? It is not the last

number in a series that breaks open the whole, but rather the first number in a universe unknown until that point, which swept away with a single brush of the hand the Aristotelian precept that “the whole is always greater than any one of its parts.”

In Cantor’s series, as in Scotus’s process of individuation, the Philosopher’s axiom is reduced to nothing by this invention of the infinite as a *dynamic of the Absolute*. The definition of infinite series rests precisely on the inverse property: between a series of this type and one or another of its parts, *there exists a constant relationship of perfect equipotence*. And it is the continued actualization of this equipotence that is at the root of the infinitary dynamic. Like Scotus, Cantor and his friend Dedekind developed in parallel the paradigms of two complementary logics, the logic of the finite and the logic of the infinite, each one characterized by operations that cannot be transposed to the other. Cantor and Dedekind emphasized that one cannot judge the qualities of infinite series by attributing properties to them that are only verifiable as part of finite series. Scotus claimed that divine—and thus perfect—attributes are formally distinct (or non-identical to each other) while at the same time being perfections, themselves infinite, that are part of the Infinite Being of God. Cantor explained that his number ω (aleph) marked an absolute disconnect with the series of natural whole numbers, since between that number and any other number in the series N , the distance was infinite. Scotus surpassed Aristotle’s numerical infinity with an ontological reflection and instituted the co-naturalness of the Absolute Being and His Infinity *in actu*.

Cantor and Scotus thus practiced the same fundamental operation, six centuries apart: a radical schism with the Aristotelian order of indefinite successiveness, and the substitution for it of *the actualized simultaneity of all successive units*, and it is precisely by this fundamental ontological break with the numeric “collection” of finite numbers that, suddenly, one gains access to infinity.

Here, the break showed the absolute power of *identification*, and specifically of identifying totality as infinity. The break showed, in the most profound way possible, the absolute freedom behind the Creation of Man, the Image of an Infinite Being, intensely free.

One cannot accede to infinity by accumulating finite totalities. Infinity requires a radical cognitive leap, and this cognitive leap, according to Scotus, is *an act of absolute will*. Free and sovereign action is thus

necessary; it alone creates truths from reality. Free and sovereign action alone is capable of bringing one face-to-face with Infinity in Action.

Thus, Cantor and Scotus came together across the centuries, and from there to beyond the End of the World: Infinite series may be defined by positive properties, while finite series may be defined only by the lack of this fundamental property. Individuation is not the result of an “accidental” action isolated in time and space, and especially not one reiterated indefinitely through numeric discontinuity; rather, it is an *infinitely dynamic process*, a nondetermined process, forever escaping the track of the numerical logic of false infinity—nominalist or Aristotelian—which, on the contrary, *determines* the common nature of humanity. Moreover, it is through Freedom, the individuation of divine Liberty, that Man gives the created World its true determination. The reversal is dazzling, like the fiery sky above him. Individuation is, therefore, a singular and unique process, made in the intelligible image of God through its most immediate actuality—that is, its infiniteness. The more we are individuals, the more individual we become.

The opposite is proof of that.

Welcome to the Territory, welcome to the drone society: This is the land where the babies are stocked in cold chamber gridlocks/This is the world where the boots are made to crush the mouth in all circumstances/This is the Planet of the talking Apes who will remain absolutely silent/This is the globe that is a ground zero where we run from block to block/This is the Mondo-Campo, this is the very last frontier/This is the Mondo-Campo, it's the no-man's-land everywhere/Welcome to the Territory, baby. ...

He, too, is an antenna, like all the living beings in the universe; he is an antenna open to the luminous sky contained in books, to the ultraviolet night that has been transformed into the arsenal of the Word, this luminous sky vibrating above him, radiating with all its infinite power from the secret library of the Territory.

Everything seems so terribly clear. Everything seems so mechanically logical—so organically interconnected—when you contemplate the state of the world seven or eight centuries later.

Especially when you have lived through the ascension, the reign, and then the fall of the Metastructure.

Especially when you have lived through the three successive “Falls” of human civilization.

Yuri can feel a strange sensation overtaking him.
Is he becoming a Christian?

37 > *HALO*

Link hesitates for a long moment.

Who should he trust with his secret? His plan to stop the Humanity-Thing before it can react, relaunch its offensive to counter the victorious campaign they are leading against it?

Judith Sevigny? The sheriff's Council? The Professor? His parents?

Or his two friends from the south of the Territory, now permanent residents of the Fortress?

In the end, he realizes that he has very little choice. If he had a choice, he would lose all real freedom.

He can undoubtedly talk to Judith about the experience, like he did last time—that is, *afterward*. And later still, to the others. But really, he has to take it to Yuri and Campbell. Nothing can change this Law of Bronze, or any other law of the Territory.

Two or three days later, while the sheriff's men and several groups of HMTV volunteers are distributing the last newly repaired radios throughout the Territory, Link goes to the home—still under construction—of the two bounty hunters, these men who have watched over both him and the Library unflinching, two big brothers living constantly at the edge of the abyss to keep him from falling into it.

He walks quickly toward their cabin, where Campbell is working and Yuri is absorbed in reading a thick volume that can only have come from the Italian cargo.

He says hello, makes some small talk, asks Yuri what he is reading. “The Prologue to the *Ordinatio*—an English translation. John Duns Scotus, you know ...”

He asks Campbell how the work is going. “Everything should be finished in three or four days at the most. It would have been finished a week ago if your father hadn't made the mistake of lending Yuri those fucking books!”

Link laughs.

Then he looks at each of them in turn, with the fire of the night in his eyes.

They both understand, instantly, that something is going to happen. The three of them know one another too well. Yuri and Campbell look back at him silently, ready for anything.

Except that.

Link explains his plan to them.

His plan to fight the devolution of humanity *from the inside*.

“The Hotel Laika again? But we went there with you two months ago and —”

“The situation has changed since then, Chrysler. I couldn’t control all the elements; I didn’t have the entire gift yet. Now I know, and I’m ready.”

“Ready? Ready for what? We saw the coded trace of the Metastructure in the local interface, just like you. It’s very interesting, because it shows that the alphanumeric mutation was ‘contained’ in the other phases of the devolution; it seems to be the departure point and the arrival point, both at the same time. We’ve already talked about all this, including with your father.”

“You don’t understand, Chrysler. It isn’t just about connecting a mass spectrograph to the exoplasm in order to look inside; not anymore. And that trace doesn’t show only the specific dynamic of the Thing; it proves, once and for all, that it really was from here, from this local microsystem, that everything took off. I don’t understand why—none of us do.”

“In other words, we’re no farther along than we were at the beginning of the year.”

“Possibly. That’s why we need to go there. Not just to observe a fossil trace through an exterior device, however sophisticated it might be.”

“Yeah? So? What do you want to plug in?”

And Link smiles, a luminous smile full of solar joy, and Yuri understands immediately, even before the boy opens his mouth. Oh no ...

“Me, Chrysler. I want to plug myself into the interface. I’ll go inside the aqualung and restore all the systems to working order.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, first the exoform and then the interface, the local network, and why not the MegaNetwork itself?”

“I’m following you. With a shortwave radio and ten or twelve thousand radios, we’re confined to the Territory. And I understand your strategy—attack the whole entity from its original point of singularity.”

“Exactly, Chrysler.”

“I know. But the network never really had any real existence; that’s what permits the Thing to keep progressing. There’s nothing material to repair, because the Metastructure was the integrative form of Humanity.”

And once again, Yuri anticipates the boy’s response:

“The Thing is the antiform of an entity that did not exist in itself; neither can exist except via ‘hardware platforms’ represented by humans themselves. I want to reactivate the anterior program so it will interfere with the devolutionary mutation.”

“There was no program in the strict sense, according to the Professor, just chaos governing itself after the primordial ‘ignition.’”

“There you go. I want to play the role of that ‘bootstrap.’ I don’t quite want to reproduce the initial ‘autopoiesis,’ exactly, of course, because that was incontrovertibly singular. But I can try to start the *process* over again.”

Yuri closes his eyes. Link does not even need to read the books in the Library; he alone *is* all the books it contains, every one of them.

Living man/dead network conjunction. Input/output. Mechanical/ organic connection in an extinct monad, open to infinity within its own enclosure.

The aqualung, that strange exoplasm, sized for a child and able to contain a whole world.

The black box, its interior strewn with a few computer devices, none of them connected to one another, none of which have functioned in years. The local network interface in the wall, inactive for just as many years, if not more. The coded trace, the “signature” of the Metastructure, or rather of its disappearance, crystallized here in a single microsystem.

Yuri draws rapid diagrams. It was at the moment of its annihilation that the immaterial, “Metamechanical” entity was able to take form, to individuate into a singularity. But it did so at the instant of its own fossilization. It individuated according to the same principle as it was annihilated. It was truly born at the very moment of its extinction.

In view of the Metamachine, electric and neural devolution are a phenomenon correlated to the ontological unity of the flux affecting

machines and brains. Electricity should be seen as the divine network of the Created World.

For the Metastructure, the only conceivable singularity was Humanity as a species, or, more exactly, as a numerical catalogue of individuals. For it, everything was reversed from the outset, and the inversion of the inversion of the Post-Machine, of devolving Post-Humanity, in no way led to the restoration of some ancient form of order, or to the invention of a new one; it led only to a simple variation in intensity of the initial chaos, which never stopped being chaos *or* initial.

The process was fossilized. And the interface contains the fossil trace of the phenomenon.

Link de Nova knows exactly what he is doing.

And he is doing exactly what he knows.

Exoplasm/more-than-human conjunction. The ontological Grand Junction within the urban Grand Junction: surviving body-mind/cataleptic machine-network. A new synthesis. An asymmetrical synthesis. A synthesis setting the stage for the division of the singularity.

Link has managed to slide into the aqualung without difficulty. He has connected the neurospinal cord to the local interface. He is now plugged into nothingness, emptiness, shadows.

The black box is plunged into its own black light, the light they can perceive with their night vision, natural or artificial; the light cast by the fire of the ultraviolet sky. They appear as phosphorescent ghosts to one another; they are just-barely physical apparitions in a world trapped between existence and nonexistence.

Pointillist armadas of rays, photonic eddies all around them. The Hotel Laika is obviously more than a simple assemblage of residential capsules. The Hotel Laika has a history; it possesses a true secret; it belongs to a story from before the Fall—a story that explains it, a story that is the main cause.

Campbell says: “Do you at least know what you’re going to do if, by some miracle, you get the system working again?”

Yuri can just barely make out the shrewd smile of the boy with the guitar behind the semiopaque mask of the aqualung. But glimpsing it is enough to etch it on his consciousness in all its luminosity.

“I won’t have to do anything, Chrysler, because if the system starts up again it will act on its own, for itself. Don’t forget, it’s a World.”

“And will it act against the Thing? It seems to me that’s what we’re trying to make happen, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t even a question of will. It is ontological. If I am able to bring it back to life, even partially, according to the creative principle of the Metastructure as it was before the Fall, it will function as a virus for the Thing, or more precisely as a deadly environment, a competitive ecology. Remember what Professor Zarkovsky said.”

“An ecology against an ecology? One environment against another?”

“Yes, two worlds that are *impossible* but parallel, which will fight a merciless war against each other—and probably kill each other without pity.”

“And you hope, evidently, that if these two ‘correlated’ worlds enter into total war with each other, they’ll leave us in peace.”

“Exactly, Chrysler.”

“Then I hope you’ve thought of the somewhat important fact that their battlefield will be our world itself, and the men who live in it.”

“It’s a risk we have to take. The only risk.”

Yuri closes his eyes. Welcome to the Territory. Welcome to the Black Box, baby.

“There aren’t many risks we haven’t faced yet,” concludes Campbell, gesturing to the young man to go ahead.

The test of truth must begin without delay. Each face of the specious dialectic must be shown its own reflection; each false world must be delivered up to its false brother. The devolutionary Post-Humanity must be given back to the Machine.

Yuri has a vague premonition—nothing specific, nothing localizable, nothing identifiable as such. A malaise, an impression, a kernel of intuition.

In the Territory, nothing ever goes as planned.

Welcome to the Territory, baby. ...

Nothing in the Territory ever goes as planned. And nothing ever lets you see what is coming. The unplanned is the fundamental rule; what appears to be happening is never what is actually happening, and what is actually happening often hides a trap.

Yuri sees the aqualung, the exoplasm inside which Link de Nova is moving, heading for the neural interface set in the wall.

He wants to make contact, physical contact. Electricity is not visible in itself; they can see only the radiation, the light. Light that is the visible manifestation of the Word, light that is the visible form of Electricity.

Yuri shudders in the face of the implications he is understanding, little by little. This is a “revelation” in the photochemical sense of the word; the film must be plunged into an acid bath and the complete transposition of the positive image awaited. On a human scale that could take days, weeks, entire books, numerous murders, the end of a world.

At his side, Campbell, a fluorescent specter, doesn’t move. He is waiting. Waiting in the black light that illuminates all secrets.

Yuri is waiting, too.

The whole world is waiting, though it does not know it yet.

True events, those that happen under the reign of the ontological break, are by definition infinitely divisive.

They divide everything. Every reality. Every possibility. Every actual narration and every potential plot.

In the first place, they fundamentally divide the field of the experiment itself. And in the first place, in the field of the experiment, they completely divide the observer’s point of view and that of the subject being observed.

Everything divides. And everything reverses. What was the interior becomes the surface. What was external becomes endogenous. What was biological becomes mechanical. What was mechanical becomes alive. What was natural becomes artificial. What was artificial becomes new nature.

Later, Yuri will wonder how to tell, in as analogous a way as possible, what happened that night in the Hotel Laika.

How to tell the simultaneous story of what they saw and what Link de Nova experienced? How to correlate, within the plot, the absolute correlation that took place? How to describe the experience they lived through, and what Link de Nova saw in the Ultraworld of Post-Humanity?

How to summarize infinite division in action?

Open out the matrix, and expose it in the updated simultaneity of all its successive unities:



LINK DE NOVA—experiment and experimenter	YURI AND CAMPBELL—observers and subjects of observation
In the exoplasm, Link de Nova learns how to carefully arrange his body according to the specific form and substance of which the aqualung is made. He checks his balance, rapidly finds the necessary gestures. The exoplasm seems as if it were designed for him. He takes a few steps and, unfaltering, moves toward the inactive neural interface.	Yuri himself is a luminescent humanoid. He sees himself through the fire of the night, through the binoculars of the secret war. He and Campbell exchange a wan smile. Things have changed indeed since the last time they were here. And they will most likely change again. Even more.
The interface is a hole. An endless tunnel, a tunnel of pure darkness in which the traces of the entire store of the digitized information of humanity from Before the Fall have been fossilized in a strange form of darker-than-black light, perfectly static. He is at the entrance to the world of dead numbers. He is in a sanctuary. He is in a necropolis. He is face-to-face with the hieroglyphs of disappeared Humanity.	In his exoplasm, Link faces the wall, a sodium yellow and ultraviolet blue statue; he remains frozen in front of the interface to which his aqualung is connected. Then, imperceptibly, as if in a state of pure reflex, unconsciously, his hand lifts slowly, the metal glove rises to the level of his face and presses against the small titanium-composite plaque gleaming on the wall.
He cannot remember exactly how it happened—oh yes, he put his hand on the interface. That's all. He feels strange changes happening inside him at lightning speed, transmutations he cannot name, or localize, or identify. It seems to him that he is absorbing	At first, nothing happens—nothing notable, anyway. Link de Nova's hand remains pressed to the neural interface, holding tightly to the neurospinal cord of the aqualung, which is connected to it. A loop, thinks Yuri. He is trying to create a loop. Link must have a strategy. He

<p>something. And at the same time, he realizes, something is absorbing him. And the thing absorbing him is the very same thing he is absorbing. Autophagy by division. He is becoming the body of what is devouring him, eating him up. And he is providing corporality to what has never managed to obtain it.</p>	<p>has been studying all of this for too long simply to improvise. But what strategy can you adopt against what is unknown by nature? How to foresee what is unforeseeable? The Hotel Laika is a perfect replica of the Territory; this black box under the dome is its Law, this exoplasmic aqualung its Convoy, its secret Library cast into the night.</p>
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LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL
<p>There is a black body. A black body of matter. This black body is the projected shadow of the Uncreated Light, he realizes, the Infinite Light that contains all infinities, all realities, all possibilities. Something is happening here, something connected to this light, to this black body; that much is obvious. Some force has been able to reverse the process inside the Metamachine, from this aqualung, and from this small, standard interface. Something, or someone, has successfully looped the Metastructure's thanatic program in on itself, obliging it to incorporate the principle that will bring about its destruction. Something, someone, has been in the aqualung before him; worse, it seems to have been two different people—one of them not yet alive, the other already dead, and this before the Fall, and so before his</p>	<p>Still this apparent immobility. The hand pressed against the wall interface, the unmoving aqualung. The black light all around them, through which they see the spectral apparitions that distinguish them from the shadows. Still this physical inertia. Is it happening inside his brain? Has his cortex established an invisible neuroconnection, or some other type of phenomenon entirely? Yuri realizes that Campbell, this phantom of astral light, is very likely asking himself the same questions. Their semitelepathy of almost-brothers. A twinning beyond anything genetic. On the lookout for the slightest abnormal phenomenon from the exoform, attentive to sudden variations in light intensity or transmutations of matter; like Yuri, his brain is ceaselessly imagining what is</p>

<p>own birth, and yet it seems that both of them were him.</p>	<p>happening on the inside—that is, inside the machine called Link de Nova.</p>
<p>Like a mutual Most Holy Absorption—that is what is happening in him, he guesses—that is, he knows. His hand is no longer this anodized glove pressed against the wall interface. His hand is inside something, the something that is inside him. Osmosis? A strange disjunctive synthesis, really: he remains what he is, but at the same time he is this entity he is becoming, and the entity is becoming what it is while yet remaining unchanged in its nature. There is a sort of exchange happening, and yet this communication leaves each source unmingled with the other, and just as paradoxically they are only one; they remain a single, indivisible entity. It takes him only an instant to understand that he is experiencing a simulation of the principle of Incarnation. A terribly authentic simulation. A simulation that can only be—his whole consciousness is ablaze with it—a specific manifestation of reality. It takes him only an instant to understand that since the beginning, since the initial point of singularity of the experiment, an absolutely unforeseen phenomenon has been taking place.</p>	<p>It is very indistinct. The binoculars show emissions of very low-intensity energy from the aqualung. An optical illusion? Yuri's gaze meets Campbell's: obviously not. Energy emissions. Low intensity. A prelude. A process is beginning. Is the system being restored to working order? Is Link de Nova's plan going to work? Is there a chance to counteract the postmechanical devolution by waking the ancient model of the Metastructure? Is there even really a possibility of reawakening what systematically self-destructed, as only this Machine-World could do? But the energy emissions do not seem to be gaining in power. He looks at Campbell. The phenomenon has not escaped his attention. And now, what is happening, exactly? One might say that the exoform is transforming, that the interface is transforming, that the hand and the wall are one, that the shadows and the light are one, that matter and infinity are one. That the aqualung and the infraworld of the dead network are one.</p>

LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL
<p>There is an infinite tension between himself and the other, all the others, any other, all the “himselves,” all the unknowns he contains; the world is for him a machine-organ barely distinct from his body-mind, and other senses than the ones usually responsible for perception have immediately and simultaneously mobilized. He sees in the tunnel of black light like he is seeing the inside of his own body, on another plane of reality he sees himself in the black box of the Hotel Laika; he can distinguish the organisms of his two friends; he can detect all the presences that lived here at one time or another, like a sort of metastable identity, at once unitary and multiple. He can see the phantoms of the past; he can see numbers; he can see Yuri and Campbell as holographic specters. And he can see the names. All the names.</p>	<p>What can be happening in this body that is turning into light, this body itself enclosed by another body, a biological body/machine-body, <i>input/output</i>, bootstrap process? Light, thinks Yuri, light, the visible face of Electricity—it is light that is being configured in the form of a third term, synthetic, permitting two corporalities to be only one. One? One with the local network interface, and thus one with the whole fossilized MegaNetwork, one with what is hidden beneath the desert of the world, one with all beings, all places, all forms of energy. Yuri realizes that light, thus composed, makes Link de Nova the true observer of the experimental transformations at work. He is the one seeing. They are the ones seen. He is the experience, but they are the phenomena.</p>
<p>But the question remains: If an entity is incarnating in him, individuating totally in him, is it this fossilized Metastructure, as if frozen forever in a photograph of itself taken at the moment of its death? And if it is the Metastructure as a thanatological principle of the highest order, why is he not dead? Why does he sense,</p>	<p>Quantum leap. The emissions of rays are localizable now, and their intensity is increasing with every instant. A phenomenon is occurring—no need to look at Campbell to know that they are on the same wavelength. Link de Nova’s hand now resembles a flaming torch. The neurospinal cord is a tube of pure light. The</p>

<p>instead, that a completely different phenomenon is at work? Has his hand not become a luminous torch, like the extremity of the exoform's neurospinal cord? Is this light not being incorporated into the tunnel of black light? Is not the black body, the "dark energy" of the universe, via this secret World, this vanished Metaworld, being incorporated into him? He is, himself, the Radio of the Territory. He understands better now to what extent he is an antenna. What is being incorporated into him is reemitted, transmuted, toward its source, and the light created by this transfer of energy is incorporated into the↓</p>	<p>interface itself is shining with a mercurial light, as if halogen blocks were blazing on the other side of the wall. Electricity, thinks Yuri. Something is happening with Electricity. Something is happening with Light. The entire surface of the aqualung is glowing now; behind the translucent face mask they can clearly see the emission of light analogous to what is emanating from the interface. A loop, thinks Yuri; he has created a loop. What has he done? Turn a loop into a loop? But he quickly realizes his error. The transmutations are happening in a series. The light from the aqualung is the same as the light from↓</p>
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LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL
<p>shadows of the Metastructure, to illuminate it little by little. It is linked to the dynamic of the process. To make an inanimate substance live, the Power of the Word is absolutely necessary. And the Word is not satisfied by the indefinite, by the repeating loop of sameness; it requires infinity. It requires the divine helix.</p>	<p>the interface, which is the same as the light from Link de Nova. And quantum leaps are happening one after another; they are no longer variations in intensity, but rather ontological breaks combining in perfect simultaneity. Remember, all machines are networks of disconnections.</p>
<p>The dark tunnel has turned back on itself; it has translated its visible surface with its invisible subworld. And this secret world is total light, infinite, containing all infinities.</p>	<p>No. This is impossible. The transformation is physical, and this time all the actions are synchronous, or nearly. The light has again increased tenfold,</p>

<p>Megamillions and megamillions of numbers, stored in the cold-storage chamber of false infinity, even blacker than the darkness of the dead network, because they are a trace of the nothingness as such. The numbers themselves are rearranging themselves in a photonic dance of flaming firebrands and rays whirling in solar hurricanes. Stupefied, he realizes that the numbers are transforming, that an overall commutation is happening little by little in their new configurations, and through the infinite light they are becoming names. He understands why he is a cosmobiological antenna; he understands that the double helix is connected by a third entity—light. He understands why the hidden structure of DNA is Trinitarian.</p>	<p>maybe a hundredfold in intensity in each specific “machine;” at the same time, it seems that the aqualung is undergoing a mysterious metamorphosis—it is turning back on itself, like a glove, yet simultaneously, and more than ever, the hand and the neurospinal cord are one, outlined in fire against the wall interface. But that is not all; it seems that a sort of depressurization is breathing in the contents of the interface toward the exoform; it is not light that seems to trace a vortex moving from quantum leap to quantum leap; it is not the dead network, extinguished and inactive; it is not the ghost of the Metastructure. It is a force of unknown origin, come from the shadows of the world that are now being illuminated.</p>
<p>Names, People, Books. Code, Flesh, Meaning. Where is he, now that he has crossed this globe of light? A beach? A desert, rather. The immense desert that is swallowing up the world. He is walking in the desert, and yet the desert is coming to him. Concrete rising above the sand. A bunker. A buried bunker. A bunker in the middle of the desert-world. ↓</p>	<p>And now the aqualung is not only illuminated from the interior, not just showing the world its internal surface; it is becoming entirely luminous, like a paradoxically “solid” assemblage of simple photons. It is becoming a visible “metastructure,” an entity situated beyond the mechanical and the biological. It is becoming what it ↓</p>

LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL

<p>Like the resilient crystal of a resistance? He goes inside the bunker, crawling through the sand. He realizes immediately that it is a huge underground library; he is walking among shelves filled with books of all sorts. The subterranean bunker is like a giant version of the Library of the Territory. Very rapidly, in the library/blockhouse, he comes across Names, People, and <i>the</i> Book. He is going to confront the truth at the speed of light.</p>	<p>contains, and what it contains is becoming what it is: a translucent, metastable, protean structure showing its own interior space—that is, Link de Nova. And Link de Nova is not the same anymore. Or, rather, of course he is the same, except that he is also engulfed in this matter/light and all his biological organs are visible, exposed to their view like a schema of general anatomy. His body <i>is</i> the light. This is physical, thinks Yuri. It is happening in the body.</p>
<p>Names, People, the Book. The Trinity incarnated here in the depths of a bunker/library. He discovers a vast room, a rectangular cube of ecru concrete. A military-looking metal desk. Two desk chairs. A sort of microreplica of the normal world in the schematic state. And on the chairs sit a man and a woman. And in the middle of the desk there is a book, an enormous manuscript, at least a thousand pages stacked right in the center of the Bakelite surface. The woman speaks: “You are in the Cosmogonic Narration Center. I am your mother.” “And I am your father,” says the man, “and we are one. We are not your ‘biological’ parents, though we created you; you were created, <i>but you were not born</i>. The World of Angels follows</p>	<p>It is happening in the body. In the body. But that means it is also in the mind, especially in the mind. They are one. Body-mind; what happens is a specific reaction that enters the synthetic disjunction of the body and the mind. These luminous emissions indicate that a form of metalanguage is taking shape within Link de Nova. This is certainly not what they planned. For example: now, Link is a luminous extension of the network that has come back to life, but not as it was before. Link has changed the order of things. He has not reanimated the Metastructure; he has opened an infiniteness in the heart of reality, and this infinity is now absorbing him. In the proper sense of the word. He has become the principal agent of some</p>

its own laws. You were born of our union, and yet your father was only a fiction made flesh by act of the cosmogonic power with which your mother was gifted. You come from another story. Practically from another world. You were born at the moment your father caused the singularity of life to arise within a semidigital creature that lived in the exoplasm. You are not that 'child in the box,' and yet you are its shadow, born by the luminous dynamic of ontic narration, because your father also placed a dead body inside the exoplasm. This dead body was ↓	luminous circuitry traveling the network and his organism in the form of an ascending spiral constantly increasing in intensity, leaping from quantum orbit to quantum orbit. Not only is he this living processor but his mouth is open—open not to speak but to swallow all the nothingness of the Numbers stored in the fossil trace. Yuri can see them, like a pipe of humming darkness that emerges from the interface to penetrate the aqualung and enter the wide-open mouth of Link de Nova. The Transmutation of energy. The phase ↓
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LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL
incorporated as part of the principle of individuation by the Metastructure, which was killed by so doing, but it left behind it a devolving Humanity that then individuated the final result of the process. You were created by this operation. Your adoptive father has been trying for more than ten years to tell of this adventure in which he participated; he has gathered testimonials, he has rewritten his book three times. You will be the one that permits the book to exist." Link understands: his "narrative" parents form a single being, while yet remaining separate. The mystery of Incarnation is a	difference of recycling. The numerical nothingness absorbed by the luminous body-spirit is immediately transposed into its reverse principle: the light of Names. He catches a glimpse of them, too, in the quicksilver current flowing along the neurospinal cord. Yuri realizes that Link is acting in a way exactly opposite of the men affected by the numeric devolution: he is not spitting out Numbers, he is swallowing them. The light is not being extinguished inside him so it can be reborn in the form of his digitized body somewhere, it is being reborn in him to ensure the

<p>principle that, once applied, may be found at all stages of individual experience. So the father/ mother being, the man/woman, while remaining man/father and mother/ woman, holds out the manuscript on the steel table. “This book must be written. It will be, because you are the antenna that will transmit it to your adoptive father’s brain. This Library is the last monad that has resisted the Antiworld, and what is to come, and what is already here. But the secret heart of the monad is contained in this single book. It is worth all the books we have brought together in the Library. It keeps all the others together. If it dies, they will all die.</p>	<p>extinction of what digitalizes bodies even before their deaths. Yuri understands just how dangerous what Link is doing is. He understands, too, just how necessary it is—and he understands how that makes it all the more dangerous. Red zone, maximum risk. What will the consequences be, of his supernatural acts on the real state of the World? And what will the aftereffects be for his own metabolism? Can he even survive an experience as intense and radical as the one he is living through? And at the very instant of the quantum leap, Yuri realizes that Link may survive, but he will never be exactly the same. He realizes that the change is only beginning.</p>
<p>There is no discontinuity between each sequence; it is a process, an infinity that stretches between him and what he is becoming at each instant. The bunker has disappeared; as a monad it has reconfigured itself into the form of an ecology surviving in the middle of the desert. In the ocean of sand, from time to time Link comes across a bunch of half-buried books, though he keeps Milan Djordjevic’s manuscript clutched tightly in his hand. He will be an</p>	<p>No, nothing happens as foreseen—it is so foreseeable! Link has not reawakened the Metastructure, he has absorbed its principle of individuation. And though Yuri does not understand how or why, this principle of individuation of the Metamachine has appeared, at the very moment of its disappearance, in the aqualung connected to this interface under the dome covering the roof of this particular hotel, here in Grand Junction. So, of course, what is</p>

antenna that writes the definitive version in the ↓	physical is beginning to transcend itself, and what is ↓
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LINK DE NOVA	YURI AND CAMPBELL
internal light of the man. Express transubstantiation: he will give shape to the Word in another body as his body becomes the Word, in a process of inscription—something is happening as he walks along this oceanless beach, this beach without spray. What is happening is extremely simple, yet the physics at work are of redoubtable complexity. He is absorbing the exoplasmic aqualung. It is becoming him and he is becoming it; they are forming a single entity, while yet remaining distinct. The globe of light is him; his being is individuating the flesh-code-meaning unity, and it is for this reason that the manuscript suddenly smolders in his hands, an atomic sphere, disintegrating in fire that reunifies matter and life. This fire will burn in him, now and forever.	not yet physical is doing the same: body-mind unified in the paradox of light, a third state between existence and nonexistence. Yuri, filled with wonder, watches the metamorphosis taking place before his eyes: the exoplasm is incorporating Link de Nova's organism; Link de Nova's organism is singularizing the exoplasm, which is being born at this very moment; Yuri knows it—it is the first true “natural cyborg” in human history. Even the computer devices that are not connected to the network are engulfed in the light; they are recombining to become organs/machines in the new human condition of which Link is now the bearer. He is an Anti-Metastructure in himself, and at the same time he is also the Anti-Fall correlated to it. He is the eminent paradox of living light.
And now everything is being consumed; his entire body is rising to the temperature of incandescence. Everything is burning, shining with a brightness never before attained; everything lives in infinite singularity;	Everything is shining; everything is being consumed as if in a furnace hotter than the sun. What is hardly a man anymore is a man-machine-light synthesis; he will speak a new language, capable of silencing the numbers of death. Everything is

everything is real, everything is absolutely artificial; everything is the Word, everything is transfigured in the↓	already so bright—everything is transfigured in the↓
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Halo.

38 > *INFECTED*

It is morning. An efflorescent, turquoise morning in the Territory. They reach the crest of Xenon Ridge, the hotel, the strip, the cosmodrome, the city of Grand Junction behind them, a cavalcade of gray-green tumbleweeds blowing in front of them. They walk silently among the cottony quicksilver reeds in tall bunches at their feet, a ball of pure gold just rising above the line of the horizon. The World is more and more beautiful. The World is no longer the World; Man will soon no longer be Man, but everything remains suffused with the light of each instant.

Once, Yuri remembers, he had the sense that his life was taking a radical turn, growing ever closer to infinity. What happened in the hotel very much resembles this infinity; he knows he is part of the greatest secret the Territory has ever hidden, however skimpy in substance.

Link de Nova walks between him and Campbell, calmly keeping pace.

Link de Nova?

Rather, the being he has become. But hasn't he simply become what he is? He is almost thirteen years old; hasn't he simply undergone the meta human equivalent of the millennia-old rite of passage to adulthood?

A pupa hatching. Caterpillar-butterfly. Actualized simultaneity of successive units. Yes, that's it; Link has become entirely what he is, and what he has become is not really human; he never has been, and he never can be, because in truth he is much *more* than that. And, even more complex, Yuri realizes that the first *natural cyborg* in history is a counterproduct of the neonature engulfing the Earth. He is completely a man; he is completely a Metamachine; and he is Electricity-Light, the *Logos-Eikon* of mechanical division. Completely. And yet he is only a single being, perfectly unique and singular.

He is a unique and singular being whose luminous body is emitting nearly all the frequencies in the visible spectrum, creating a gold-silver halo all around him. The exoplasm and its integrated nanocomponents have

become organs in the biophysical supermachine that is Link de Nova, and the light keeps all these multiplicities in one dynamic, active, actualized unit.

They won't be able to hide the secret for long in the Valley of Heavy Metal; they need to stay coherent: wanting to hide it from the residents of HMTV means running the risk of revealing it, in one way or another, to the men on the outside. This very morning they will speak to Milan Djordjevic and Paul Zarkovsky, and then request an urgent meeting of the City Council. Sheriff Langlois' security measures have quite a time in store for them. The Fortress will become the Citadel, the Sanctuary, the Tabernacle itself. The Law of Bronze will become Titanium Armor.

When you can't hide a secret, Campbell often says, you have to shine a bright light on it. Light can blind. It can even keep certain essential details from being seen.

In this particular case, thinks Yuri, gazing at the brilliant silhouette superimposed on Link's organic structure, that is no metaphor. Link himself is light. He is infinite division. He is the first cyborg of neonature. He is singularity-infinity-action. He is man-machine-electricity. He is body-mind-light. He is matter-space-time. He is what was hidden inside him. The greatest secret in the Territory.

They are descending the mesa when, all at once, they perceive the presence of a living being behind them, and Yuri knows that, at the same instant, all three of them have guessed who it is.

The dog gives an almost comical grimace of surprise when they stop and turn toward him in concert.

Balthazar, the bionic dog, the mascot of HMTV, the guardian of the Hotel Laika. Why was he absent the previous night? On that night, of all nights? Yuri realizes that while the three humans are gifted with their own particular intuitive mechanisms, Balthazar, the bionic dog of war, has remained true to his own. And he has as much to tell them as to ask them.

He has probably followed them from the hotel, but why didn't he come up under the dome, where he knows everything is always happening?

The dog himself explains it to them. He anticipated the boy's visit, as usual, and he had remained on the premises. He did not go under the dome because it proved impossible. The whole hotel suddenly became an extremely dangerous place, more lethal than the immediate surroundings of a stripped-down nuclear reactor, and the intensity of the "radiation"

increased with one's proximity to the dome. He had had a great deal of difficulty even reaching the eighth floor, and he hadn't been able to stay in the hallway on the top floor for more than a few minutes.

He explains to them that an invisible energy barrier had prevented him from entering the topmost service stairways. He tells them what they should already know.

"I don't know what you created up there," says Balthazar. "But I think you've set off what is going to become a global catastrophe. Link de Nova's mutation seems to me to be a clear and obvious indicator."

And Yuri, dumbfounded, hears Campbell answer the talking dog:

"Link's mutation is an indicator, but you don't know how to read it. And as for the global catastrophe you're talking about, best to admit to yourself that it's all that can save us now."

"A catastrophe is going to save us? Is that bounty-hunter humor?"

And Campbell smiles the smile of a Territory carnivore. "When the threat consists of the establishment of an order based on permanent recycling, my dear Balthazar, health lies in the occurrence of a total event that will restore the dynamic of the living."

Lord, thinks Yuri. Has Campbell been reading books from the Library on the sly?

No, you idiot, it's what happened last night in the hotel. Campbell, too, realized that we were experimental subjects just as much as Link—he, just as much as I, experienced the flashes of awareness that the situation itself brought on.

None of the three of us is the same anymore. None of the three of us will ever be the same.

We have gone over to the other side.

The other side of infinity.

Here, on the earth of the last men, the sky is transforming. To the south, a new black-and-bronze wall is rising in the Pennsylvania sky and heading for the Territory, stirring up immense swarms of silica and dust. Another huge Arctic blizzard is coming from the north, its clouds of white powder slowly filling the boreal sky.

The atmospheric changes in progress do not escape the notice of the men heading for their respective homes, or the dog making for his own. A new double torment, snowstorm/sandstorm, will soon vent its wrath on the Territory—and this time it will not miss its target; it is clear that the Thing is clamping its climatic jaws down on them, the resistance fighters.

If the changes in the weather are obvious to men—even artificial ones—and to dogs—even amplified ones—there is no way they can avoid being detected by one of the large purple crows native to the Territory. The bird rises up in front of them, soaring from the top of a pile of crushed vehicles and soaring southeast with great strokes of its powerful wings, toward where the morning light is illuminating everything.

The bird flies above the Territory, passing the small townships of the central steppes and then Aircrash Circle, skirting Omega Blocks, crossing the highway north of Junkville and then gliding in concentric circles above the large city where everything is recycled. It turns toward Neo Pepsico, the city's supermarket. The township specializes in food, alcohol, and household products of all kinds—canned foods, meat, sugar, salt, spices, pasta, cloned rice, synthetic coffee, detergent, paint, soap, wax, paint remover, acid, some basic medications—everything is available. Some local Triads even grow fruits and vegetables in subterranean hydroponic incubators. This is where birds such as the crow generally go in search of sustenance. A little farther on, elongating its elliptical circle, the bird passes above Leatherneck Mills, the township of leather tanners and clothing manufacturers, who produce garments from recycled materials of all origins. It is the Fashion and Style Center of the region. Between the two townships there is a small, solitary butte marking the western border, not far from Midnight Oil. The bird does not know the name of the butte, or of any other place in the Territory; for it, human signs are just an epiphenomenon of nature, the only thing that counts.

This isolated butte is jointly managed by the two large neighboring townships. It is the source of a commodity generally little sought-after in Junkville, but which sometimes finds a taker or two.

Books. Magazines. Newspapers. Writing. Fixed images, drawings or photos, the work of rotary presses and glossy paper. The tanners and couturiers of Leatherneck know how to stitch, splice, and restore, and they know techniques for processing cellulose. The merchant Triads of Neo Pepsico know how to store, and how to sell. It is a symbiotic

complementariness. Men are much closer to nature than they like to think. And especially to this encroaching neonature.

The bird soars above PaperPlan, the microtownship of pornographic magazines, bus-station books, business prospectuses, tourist brochures, and political tracts.

Now the crow lands. It has spotted some kernels of corn and bits of frozen beef accidentally spilled by a transshipment truck.

Before its piercing predator's eyes stands the small hill of PaperPlan and the containers piled around the few cabins scattered on the clinker butte. It sees two men inspecting their containers and speaking loudly, punctuating their words with sweeping gestures and interjections.

The purple crow cannot understand what they are saying, but as it flutters up to perch on the roof of the nearest Combi-Cube, it sees what may have provoked their agitation.

The human signs have disappeared. The small graphics have been erased from most of the pages of those assemblages of paper and black ink they love to look at.

The photos and drawings are still there, but the newspapers, the magazines, the books, the circulars, the thinnest booklets are now empty of any writing or nearly so; some signs are still there in the form of strange, incomplete ideograms, but these too are slowly and systematically vanishing as if touched by an invisible eraser. The two men hurry to warn their neighbors, waving stark-white sheets of cellulose. No more writing, no more printed graphics, no more black ink—this seems to aggravate the men on the small hill to an extremely high degree. The phenomenon has affected all of PaperPlan in a single stroke. The panic is palpable. Something has come again to smash the human anthill.

The crow takes flight again, turning back toward the north of the Territory, to its point of origin.

It is the silent bearer of news that is already changing the world; it is the mute witness to the annihilation of the word.

It is only a Territory crow. But it knows.

When events are endless lines cut into a process, no specific point can really be aware of singularities put in motion. Simultaneity in action, when

it is total, cannot be described. It lacks—not sense, but a code that can make it understandable.

The reunion with Link de Nova. The globe of light illuminates his whole mobile home; the functionalities of the exoplasm are now part of his biological structure; his body shows, as if via a constantly working X-ray machine, all his internal organs, natural and artificial, because they are a single substance in the same being, all of it held together by the active presence of the halo.

The meeting with his parents, ontological shock of great magnitude, and then the sheriff, and then the members of the Council. Truth, full-faced, as clean and implacable as the brightness of a one-megaton bomb. Now we all know, thinks Yuri. Now the best-kept secret in the Territory is the Fortress itself.

Link de Nova's firmness is remarkable for a boy of his age.

"I am neither a human nor an android. I am the first cyborg in neonature. I was created, but I was not born, except through the intermediary of a narrative twelve years ago—my parents know it, but they couldn't tell. My father is trying to write the story: I am the product of an ontological operation conducted on the Metastructure by a man who became flesh from a fiction created by the woman with whom he conceived me; they were two absolutely distinct natures, yet only one. I am the intensified inversion of a semiexistent creature that was produced as a side effect of the creation of the fiction-man, a 'Box-Child' closed in his exoplasm, a sort of humanoid image of the base principle of the Metastructure. I am thus a true fiction, a fiction made real. And this transmutation that is happening in me is the result of the individuation by my being of all the humanity stored by the Metastructure at the time. Rather than penetrating the devolution from inside the Metastructure—its fossil—as I initially planned, I have incorporated the devolution by individuating the fossil Metastructure. I believe I will be able to immunize all the people in the Territory little by little, and, more than that, I am becoming the sole carrier of the devolutionary mutation that I am incorporating, and then disincorporating in light. Do you understand?"

Yuri thinks to himself that it does not matter very much whether they understand or not, or who doesn't understand, or who understands what, or who understands anything else. What counts is that the boy with the guitar

is now all the Electricity of the Word; he is the active form of Light. He is the life within the Halo.

The sun casts its pale, iridescent light on the peaks of the township of Little Congo. Through the window of his mobile home at the summit, the man from Neon Park watches the slow glaciation of the landscape in the bluish light of dawn. A large purple crow is flying over Neo Pepsico.

It is done. The operation took place in the depths of the night. An operation that will change him more deeply than all the others he has carried out on his own body. And this time he was not the one doing the operating. Besides, can one really call it an “operation”? Not in the surgical sense, at any rate. Because all the android did was open his mouth and extract a miniscule black granule, like a morsel of coal. *“The entity has created this from my body and its genetically symbiotic nanoimplants. It is a part of my body, if you will, but it has been reengineered by the entity. This is the means of entry.”*

And Silverskin had absorbed this force that, he understood immediately, absorbed him in return, all of him, holding him inside of it as if in a prenatal placenta, permitting him to be a little more than a simple individual, offering him the possibility to become an integral part of the new species. Immortality is a network; the immortality of the entity is the ultimate form of recycling; through it, all of humanity’s organs will become interchangeable and constantly renewed thanks to collective multi-cloning. *“For a man like you,”* the android had said, smiling, *“becoming immortal is very simple. All you have to do is become like us.”*

Everything had coalesced, suddenly. Everything imploded—all his certainties, all his doubts, all his hopes, and all his despair, too.

The android is much more than the last of his species built before the Fall.

He is the first carrier of a new form of humanity.

He is the intermediary; he bears it within him, and asks only to share it. “It is ‘she’ who asks me to serve, and to intercede for you others, poor humans; that is why she uses me, I who am not completely a man,” the android had told Silverskin on D-day, the day Silverskin accepted his offer. “‘She’ is the entity born of the Fall of the Metastructure, and she wants to complete her original mission: she wants to create a *neohumanity*. And,

understand me, Silverskin, whatever the powers of this little boy you are hunting all over the Territory might be, they can never match those of the Anome.”

“The Anome?”

“That is the name I have given her; she has rewarded me for it.”

“What is it?”

“The force created by successive devolutions of the Fall of the Metastructure. It is this force that, molding the new humanity, I must build. It draws the plans, and I construct the edifice.”

“And what is this edifice?”

“What the boy can never offer you. He may be capable, somehow, of promising absolute immunity against the Anome and its prior mutations, but this function is purely negative. He cannot offer the positive reality the Anome will bring you.”

“What positive reality? At the moment, it seems that he or she has simply exterminated practically three-quarters of the planet.”

“Immortality. Your body will be self-recycling, infinitely so, if you agree to become part of the Anome—that is, of the neohumanity.”

“You mentioned some sort of ‘contamination’?”

“It was a metaphor. The Anome is much more than a virus. And as for contamination—you should really see it as the ultimate contamination; that is, vaccination.”

“Somewhat like the boy in the north of the Territory, then.”

“No. I told you. The boy knows how to fight the local phenomena the Anome has invented to prepare humanity for the great mutation, but he cannot guarantee you immortality.”

“And you can? Prove it. Lay your cards on the table.”

“I’m not the one holding the cards. The Anome is. If you want answers to your questions, you must give yourself to ‘Him’ or ‘Her’—it doesn’t matter which. When you make contact, you will understand. And you will become immortal.”

“And in exchange, you are still asking just for the location of this other android?”

“The price has gone up slightly, actually. There are three of them now. Three fourth-generation androids. And something has to be done about this mysterious little man.”

“Three fourth-generation androids in the Territory? That’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible is usually just a truth poorly or incompletely understood. There are three of them. I know it. I have to find them.”

“You have to kill them, right?”

“The Anome will handle that, because they are its mortal enemies, and I am the only android to have integrated the death of the Metastructure at the moment of conception of its own identity. None of them can survive in the presence of the Anome. For me, it is the opposite. In a way, if the Anome could really incorporate itself in an individual unit, so to speak, you might say that I am the Anome. But really, I am only its principal vector. I am the one chosen by it as a machine/organ of reproduction.”

“But we humans ... we can—I mean, can we survive in the presence of the Anome?”

“Yes. It is an ‘exchange.’ I’ll give you the details. Remember, fourth-generation androids and *Homo sapiens* are indistinguishable except for secondary differences.”

“You’re forgetting one essential difference—we aren’t born through multicloning in embryogenesis incubators.”

“No, that’s exactly right. But that’s what the Anome is really seeking. It needs men, just as much as men need the Anome.”

An *exchange*, thinks Silverskin. The Anome has good business sense. Whatever it really is, it fits into the Territory perfectly.

Later, in the early afternoon, Alan Cybion informs him that he wants to go to New Arizona and then to the southwestern part of the Territory, to Grand Funk Railroad. The Anome wants to perfect its knowledge of the local topography. He asks Silverskin for the use of one of his hybrid Jeeps. Jade Silverskin senses in himself the fragmented presence of a being asking only to connect with other points in the network; he perceives the paradox of the indeterminable metabolic field absorbing him from the outside, this second skin superimposed precisely on the original, and without substance other than a form of invisible black light filling his organic interior with its serene opacity. He is immortal.

It is like the just barely physical substance of a second epidermis taken from the inside, yet which is becoming part of him from the outside. The Anome is in him, just as he is part of the Anome. It is an extremely

soothing sensation. Maybe the most soothing he has ever felt. He is immortal.

Which is undoubtedly the reason why the first seconds of the discussion consist on his part of a few automatic nods of the head, even before he fully realizes that the rendezvous time has arrived and his guests are already present. He is immortal; it will be difficult for him to focus on anything other than this knowledge at each instant.

“I always begin with the bad news, Mr. Silverskin; that lets me lighten things up afterward with the good.”

“I’m listening and ready for your bad news, Mr. Belfond. Then we can get to the good.”

“There’s only one thing. We still haven’t found any trace of Vegas Orlando. But we have found what vanished briefly from our field of vision—I’m talking about the suspicious disappearance of Redcoat Willy and his friend, the ones Vegas Orlando hired to protect him and trap any possible followers. Better still, thanks to that, we have, I believe, marked out the area to search for the two strangers in the black pickup, one of whom might well be the man with the red Kawasaki.”

“Start at the beginning, please. Red or black, I don’t care.”

“The colors are identifiers, Mr. Silverskin. First we went back to Deadlink, where we had the last eyewitness accounts mentioning a pale yellow Toyota pickup following a bright red Kawasaki. We questioned all the witnesses listed. An old guy living in the north of the township had a flash of memory; he remembered that the motorbike and the Toyota were driving on Nexus Road, but that the Kawasaki turned off onto a side road leading into the savanna, to connect with a north-south road that cuts through the woods along Champlain Banks. Road C, I think—that’s what he told us. So we took that. When we got to Row 301, the last one of the whole series coming down from up there, the North Junction on Monolith Hills, we turned toward Neon Park and searched the whole city, with no result. Then we took Row 300 back, a hundred and fifty meters farther north, and then Nexus Road to Deadlink again. Not to interrogate the witnesses again, but to look for new ones—and, if possible, to find any migrants who had passed through Neon Park or its environs during the last three months.”

“And?”

“We found them. A group of nomads from Vermont. They crossed through that part of the Territory in early February and camped for a while

in an abandoned part of the city. One afternoon they saw smoke rising from the hills nearby—thick, black smoke. There had been a noise like an explosion. They thought it was looters or something like that, and they fled. So we went back to Neon Park following the precise directions the nomads gave us, and we took Row 299—that’s where we found the Toyota. We’d just barely missed it the first time.”

“And the two men?”

“What do you think? After three months, the bodies were totally decomposed and the car was a hunk of scorched metal. It had been rolled into a ravine, but the two men were killed *before* that. We found a hypodermic needle in Redcoat Willy’s neck; I don’t know what killed the big black one, the corpse hunter from Vortex. It was a professional job.”

The man pauses, while Silverskin ponders the situation.

“I’ve also got to tell you that, unfortunately, we lost four men around eight days ago. They followed the guy with the black pickup, the one we’d been watching at Aircrash Circle. We lost track of the other one a week before in Snake Zone. So right away I stationed two teams permanently at the crater. The guy had been missing for almost a month when he reappeared with some HMTV cops; local witnesses told us about it. Then our men followed them, and no one ever saw them again. We’ve looked in Neon Park, but so far nothing’s turned up. They could be anywhere in the Territory, really.”

“Are these bounty hunters working with the HMTV cops?”

“No doubt about it, Mr. Silverskin.”

Belfond pauses for a few more seconds to allow Silverskin to contemplate these new details. Now the real fun begins.

“Now let’s move on to the essential point, if you don’t mind. Strange things are happening in Junkville, and all over the Territory.”

“Explain.”

“Twice now, the HMTV county police have come down to trade completely restored vehicles in Autostrada.”

“Nothing odd about that; the sheriff’s men do that regularly. Business exchanges with the north of the Territory are profitable. What’s the problem?”

“They’ve come down twice in *one* month. My informers say they’ve never seen so much activity in Autostrada.”

“Listen, Belfond, they need gasoline, or I don’t know what, so they’ve doubled their pace. You’re not—”

“That isn’t it, Mr. Silverskin. Listen to me; they’ve traded a total of a dozen all-terrain vehicles in perfect working order—normally it would be three months before they unloaded that many, and it wouldn’t be for gasoline from Reservoir Can or food from Neo Pepsico, or even whores from Toy Division.”

“What, then?”

“Radios, Mr. Silverskin. Thousands of them. Rumors have been circulating for two weeks; the techno Triads are scooping up every available radio. But that’s not all; there’s a lot more.”

“So far I can’t say you’ve impressed me. So the HMMV cops are collecting all the radios in the Territory. The choice of available noisemakers is pretty much infinite; a lot of good it will do them!”

“You’re missing the essential point: it seems that the county cops, along with their militia of volunteers, are going all over the Territory distributing these radios for free.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Belfond. Something for free in the Territory?”

“Yes. It’ll make sense when I tell you that inoperative radios come out of HMMV in perfect working order, and that anyone who listens to a particular frequency—I don’t know which—on these radios immediately has no more trouble related to the successive ‘Falls,’ including the last one. Do you see what I’m talking about now, what’s happening, where it’s happening and how, or do you need me to draw you a picture?”

Jade Silverskin begins shuddering as if he has been hit by a high-caliber bullet. Everything stops. Everything begins to make sense.

The north of the Territory. The former Quebec. Sheriff Langlois’ Fortress. That’s where the Professor from Texas and the boy with the secret powers are hiding. That’s where Vegas Orlando probably died. That’s where the two bounty hunters must be living. That’s where the working radios are coming from.

That’s where the android lives, the one Alan Cybion wants to destroy.

The *androids*, rather.

But everything has changed on the other side of the mirror, too.

The mysterious boy has found a way to heal and immunize some of the humans in the Territory against the various mutations of the Post-

Metastructure. Now he is managing to use radios as a means of transmitting his healing powers. Good. Very good.

It is no small feat, he has to admit.

But it carries no weight in comparison to what the android born of the Metastructure's extinction can offer.

As he told Silverskin one day, "*I have some information that will interest you, and that is well worth its price, believe me. You'll see.*"

Alan Cybion, the android claiming to have been born at the exact time of the Metastructure's death, possesses a power greatly superior to any the little man in HMV can possibly have.

The android has come to the Territory to begin the true transformation of Humanity. He has come to change man, to permit him to pass to the other side of the mutations designed as *methods of selection*, and to finally live in peace.

The peace of immortality.

Silverskin looks at Belfond and his colleagues with utter calm. The network is trying to take shape within him; it wants to stretch to other points that will join its process of infinite recycling.

But everything flows from the source; everything remains pure within the logic born of this absolute form of numeric infinity operating in the depths of his body, like a permanent calculator—he understands; yes, he understands what the Anome is doing. Instead of transforming the living into numbers, like during the last mutation, it is now translating numbers into neolife; thus everything is being born in concert with this profound peace, with his second skin, his second identity, this double interface that, by nature, makes him a nonsingular being, one constantly seeking an addition to its digital infinity, part of a network, but with the opaque, placental joy offered by this promise of infinite recycling, this hope of biological, collective, global immortality.

Immortality is itself the new form of humanity, and it will undoubtedly demand even more sacrifices in the future than those already made.

"I have a new contract to offer you," he says, simply.

39 > *EYES WITHOUT A FACE*

For reasons mysterious even to them, reasons they cannot explain in any rational manner except by the obscure ties of having spilled blood together, it is Yuri and Campbell that the soldier-monk seeks out, to tell them the news.

Yuri and Chrysler are working together on their cabin; Duns Scotus' books will have to wait until the job is finished, Campbell has forcefully hinted. "He won't protect us from the double storm that's going to hit in two or three days."

"You don't think so?" Yuri asked, simply.

But, Yuri knows, Duns Scotus cannot protect them from an invasion from the high atmosphere; no one can, not the living and especially not the dead. Duns Scotus cannot shelter them from climatic chaos either, but he will be of great aid in helping them understand what Link is going to have to face. And understanding your enemy goes a long way toward defeating it; it means you have *measured it up*.

There can be no further doubt; the transmutation of the boy indicates that he has made a definitive quantum leap. There may still be a few days of adaptation to go, but the Radio of the Territory, Zoo Station, Grand Dynamite Audio, will soon cede its place to a successor. It, too, is only a prototype, a test bed, an experimental specimen. Yes, Link is adapting to the methodologies of the Thing, and he will shortly leapfrog it. He is proceeding as if in an engineering laboratory, conducting series of tests and then moving on to the next phase without giving the Thing a chance to take back the initiative. It is a military-industrial-psychological complex. After Stalingrad, Kursk. After Kursk, the Don. Stormoviks in chase, panzer killers, Siberian joy, Cossack joy, aerial joy, the joy of the attack. Welcome to the Territory, welcome to the red-light district, welcome to the Territory, let's rule the Law at its peak, welcome to the Territory, welcome to the most

beautiful game, welcome to the Territory, I see your soul behind a wall of flame.

The words come to him strangely, all alone in a single flare of mental incandescence. It is as if Link de Nova's and Judith Seigny's song no longer belongs to them—or, rather, as if additions can be made without destroying the original. The song "Welcome to the Territory" acts as a signal, the "long sobs of the violins of autumn" of their D-day; it may even become a long Ariadne's thread, joining together all who add a stanza, a couplet, a refrain, or a verse to it, creating a chain of individuals connected by a unique creation, but where each singularity finds its own place. ...

Link de Nova is the orchestra conductor of the maneuver. He manipulates electricity, and this is only the beginning. His field of action will rapidly expand beyond the borders of the Territory; it will come up against the Thing on the whole of the battlefield, the entire Earth; Yuri does not know how, but it is certain. Link has become a pivotal structure around which the neoworld will revolve; he will draw humanity toward its salvation and not its absolute devolution. He alone will be Radio Free Territory, Zoo Station, Grand Dynamite Audio—but he will be broadcast on every frequency in the universe. He will be the living antenna transmitting waves around the globe.

The Territory is taking on the dimensions of a planet—a whole planet that will be familiar with the Law of Bronze.

Everything is turning out for the best on this afternoon, still sunlit between the two celestial walls closing in with the mechanical slowness of stratospheric bulldozers.

Everything is turning out for the best; the cabin will be finished before the storm arrives. Everything is turning out for the best. Link is ready now to confront the Thing in every theater of war. The battle to come will be the most terrible ever to occur in this tormented world; it will surpass by far all those that preceded it. It will contain them all; it will compact them all, like a compressed computer file.

Everything is going well. It will be the Six-second War. In the Seventh second, the Thing's surrender will be signed in the flash of a supernova, and humanity will be truly safe.

Just then, Francisco Alpini comes toward them, his face drawn and pale, his eyes tired, teary, and bloodshot, his lips flecked with yellowish foam. Lack of sleep? Stress? It is not surprising; he hasn't slept, has hardly eaten for at least forty-eight hours. He seems dehydrated, and like he hasn't seen

daylight in some time. Indeed, it has been a long while since he even left his truck.

An alarm beacon begins to blink in Yuri's mind. *Bad news*, he thinks mechanically.

The news is indeed not good; Yuri can see it plainly. Especially from the point of view of the Italian monk, who is planning to depart from Halifax in June on a Nova Scotian ocean liner bound for northern Spain. Francisco Alpini may not have planned it, but it is clear that he will always be a soldier-monk—but a soldier-monk of the Territory.

No, the news is really not good.

“Rome has fallen. The Vatican could only hold out for twenty-four more hours after that. The last soldiers, the Venetians and Lombards, sacrificed themselves. Every member of my Order.”

Yuri can sense the desolation, the infinite regret, the profound sorrow in this man who could not defend what he swore to defend with his very life; he can sense the unknowable sadness of this soldier who has missed his own death, missed everything he spent decades—a lifetime—preparing himself for.

Never again will he see the Roman arcades of the Viale Vaticano, never again the bridges stretching across the Tiber, never again the secret doors through which to enter the Eternal City, which is no more.

He was able to pick up snatches of distress calls coming from the whole region on their old shortwave radio; it might be better if the thing hadn't worked, muses Yuri. He spent whole days and nights listening live to the destruction of the Holy City. He must have passed agonizing hours trying in vain to make himself heard in the last Circle of Hell.

The Vatican has fallen. Rome is in ruins. The Holy Pontiff and all the high dignitaries of the Church have been crucified, shot, decapitated, hung, and burned alive; the priests, the monks and nuns have been hunted down and killed, and the common people massacred or taken into the most brutal kind of slavery. Half the city is in flames. The one and only Fall of Rome itself has happened at last.

“French neo-Islamists?” asks Campbell.

“French, German, Belgian, Balkan, Turkish, Arab—not to mention all the renegade and schismatic armies—anarchists, Nazis, Communists, neo-Cathars, neo-Pagans, neo-Manichaeans, neo-Nestorians, neo-Gnostics, heretics of every sort ...”

Campbell looks the soldier-monk straight in the eyes. “I am well aware that this news is extremely painful for you, Mr. Alpini, but now let’s look at the situation objectively. This is the last gasp of this era in history. Now they will all kill one another, like the miserable fuckers in Maine and New Brunswick, and they’ll do it systematically while the Thing continues its work—just as systematically. All they’ve won is a quicker death than the rest; they will leave smoking ruins in their wake. Fine. But like the fifth-century Vandals, no one will find even a trace of their bones in the desert, the desert they are serving as an advance guard. The Thing is just using them as temporary recyclable materials, as it always does.”

“You don’t understand. It doesn’t really matter who dies and who lives, in the usual meaning of the words. The First Rome has fallen; it has fallen exactly two millennia after the Temple of Solomon. That means that there is absolutely nothing left that can stop the coming of the Antichrist.”

“The Antichrist didn’t wait for the Vatican to fall before coming among us, Mr. Alpini. He’s been at work around here for quite a while already.”

“The Vatican was the last Fortress of the Holy Spirit. Now, whatever form he takes, the Antichrist will reign supreme.”

Yuri and Campbell do not answer. Neither of them wishes to engage in a useless polemic with this soldier-monk, traumatized as he is by the destruction of his civilization.

But they both know that there is a point in the world where resistance can still organize; they both know there is another Fortress, and they both know who its Guardian is. They know very well that the two things are closely connected.

“The First Rome has fallen,” says Yuri simply. “That means, maybe, that another one is ready to be built.”

“Before we think about founding a City,” remarks Campbell the next day, “I’m afraid we’ll have to learn to live hidden, underground. In caves, like in prehistoric times. Or in catacombs—like the first Christians.”

Yuri replies simply that the Fall—the physical fall—of the Vatican corresponds perfectly to the planning of events since the Fall—the numeric fall—of the Metastructure. Under the latter’s reign, religions were completely privatized; that was its solution, however incomplete, to the Grand Jihad, and it had, thanks to much private funding, spurred the creation of personal churches and familial religions. Then the Metastructure had fallen. And twelve years later, the last holy city in the world has been

ravaged by armies responding to the call of all the religious wars in history. From the universal privatization of all spirituality, we have moved to the posthistoric collectivization of God. The progression is noteworthy.

In the Territory everything is mechanical, even death. They know this. If death cannot escape this anthropological given, what can be said for simple ghosts of the living?

Everything fits perfectly with the double storm that is now arriving, turning the sky dirty-black above the ocean and shadowing the northern sky with its powdery whiteness.

Campbell guesses, intuitively, that the physical Fall of the Vatican is only the latest manifestation that the phenomenon of the Thing, the Post-Humanity, has caused since the digital Fall of the Metastructure. *The last gasp of this era in history*, he said. Though for different reasons, and different activities that are no less significant, Campbell, like Link de Nova, does not need to read the books in the Library.

Campbell learns very fast; he is the human computer; he has received the education of a predator—and as such, he is the Territory. He does not need to understand it; it is the Territory that must try to understand Chrysler Campbell. Link de Nova is the Library; he has been absorbing its teachings since the day of its arrival in HMT. Likewise, Campbell is the Territory; he has been absorbing it since his earliest youth. For him, it is an open book. The comparison is glaringly obvious. In that, thinks Yuri, Link and Campbell are alike—they are truly what they are becoming; they are maps taking on the dimensions of an entire territory, the scope of a world. And, Yuri realizes, Campbell has changed greatly since leaving Aircrash Circle—and especially since the night at the Hotel Laika. Even more than he changed after the venture in the Gaspé. Much more. Infinitely more.

The Territory is Campbell's halo.

Judith Sevigny comes to see them that morning as they are putting the finishing touches on the outside of the house; they will begin work on the roof in the afternoon, and by the following day they will be ready for the double storm. Just in time.

Judith is a storm in herself, muses Yuri as she approaches, contemplating the beauty of her hair, black as the ultraviolet night, and her violet eyes like meteoric crystals. And, he adds to himself, barely daring even to think the

words: the light of the supernatural is Link's halo. The Territory is Chrysler's halo. And Judith Sevigny is mine.

She has come just to see them, urgently, to notify them of the changes that are taking place: for three days now, since the night at the Hotel Laika, Link has not left his hangar; he has sealed himself inside it hermetically, cutting off all communication with the outside world.

"He does that sometimes," says Yuri. "It's nothing unusual."

"Nothing unusual? If the transformation of a human being into an entity that has totally integrated the principal of the Metastructure—even though it was annihilated long ago—and the turning of that human being into a sort of cosmic antenna is normal to you, then I bow down before you."

"Link was never human, Judith. Admit it. He has just become what he always was; we have nothing to do with his transmutation. It has to happen, that's all."

Judith looks at him coldly. His confidence falters a little. *You may be a Territory man, Yuri McCoy*, she is thinking, *but you're not a Post-World man yet*. "Ah? All right, then; I guess the news from the Ring *has* to arrive, too, *that's all*."

"What news?"

"The expansion of the Third Fall, the alphanumeric devolution. It's affecting all the continents now, homothetically; it used the Territory as a testing ground. I've heard that there are only around two and a half billion people left on Earth, is that right?"

"That's a very optimistic number," answers Yuri. "According to our estimations, barely 30 percent of humanity could have survived the successive Falls up to this point. There aren't even two billion left—and it's probably much less," he finishes gloomily.

"The 'Fall' can only get worse. According to the observers in the Ring and their surveillance drones, if the rhythm follows its current upward curve, there will be around fifty million more deaths between now and the end of the year, and it will double next year—and so on."

A half billion human beings in less than four years of work. If the progression continues at this rate, it won't even take the Thing two more years to finish the job. The Thing's own arithmetic is ontologically seamless; there will have been barely six years between the last "Fall" and the "Crucifixion," the final extermination of the human race. There will undoubtedly be several variables caused by its fundamental inability to

produce series of divisions with a zero sum, but it will destroy through attrition. It will simply act so as to conserve a store of “living” humans indefinitely, recycling them, because that is its function. A few million individuals should be quite sufficient.

“That is exactly why Link de Nova’s transformation has to take place,” says Campbell, coolly. “He can anticipate the Thing’s mutations; he’s one step ahead of it. In any case, there won’t be any more delayed attacks like before, which means that we still have a chance. The Vatican may have fallen, but there’s still the Territory. There’s still HMV, the Fortress, and there’s still Link. Link, who is going to reverse the phenomenon. Or, rather—Link, who *is* the Phenomenon.”

Yuri remains silent.

Later, as if to strike the fatal blow, Judith shows them the video files she has received from the Ring via the hangar radio station.

“By a stroke of luck, I received these the morning before the night Link locked himself into his studio, after you came back from the Hotel Laika. I had to run them through some decoding software that still doesn’t work too well; that’s what’s taken so much time,” she informs them.

The software might not work well, but the world seems to be faring even worse. Much worse. It has been years since they have seen images like this. Years that humanity has lived this way, cut off from itself, just like before the Metastructure—but now it is after the Fall, and so mankind has been delivered up to the Thing; that is, to the principle of inverted individuation, and integrated by the Metastructure during its extinction, and now incorporated in turn by the humanity that is the material face of this machine without substance of its own, as a species, as a genome, mechanically, biologically, in the definitive plan of the singularity annihilating itself in false numeric infinity. It is the most redoubtable trap in which humanity has ever found itself caught. Because this trap is not only itself but what it has become.

They have to see the extent of the damage. They are the Camp Doctors. And the Camp is the World.

“The first drone flew over southern Asia, and this is what it picked up: The few surviving metropolises, which have become mass shantytowns, are experiencing the exact same deadly monsoon; everywhere—in the streets,

on the sidewalks, in the abandoned pathways of the slums and the huge boulevards of the megacities, inside makeshift shelters, Recyclo particleboard houses, prefabricated houses, Combi-Cubes, luxury hotels-turned-superprotected bunkers, malls-turned-colonies, office buildings taken over by hordes of migrants, aerostations, factories, ports, docks, dikes, breakwaters, cartels of floating houses, offshore cities, clusters of drilling platforms, cargo ships and ocean liners-turned-nautical cities—the scene is identical, from India to the Philippines, from southern China to Australia: corpses piled in the streets and on the decks of ships, thrown into the seas or tossed into dumpsters waiting for the local recyclers—sharks or humans, which might as well be the same thing. Whole groups of men and women—and children—in various stages of devolution, haunting public places with their bizarre presences and their digitized language before sinking, sometimes in a clean drop, sometimes a pathetic downward slide, falling where they are, and where they will soon become part of neonature while their digital ghost is stored somewhere, in some ‘box,’ forever.”

No, the news from planet Earth is not very good.

“The second drone circumnavigated the Mediterranean—Asia Minor, the Middle East, northern Africa, southern Europe. I think this might interest you.”

And so they see what they do not want to see, they, who are already men of the Post-Fall. What they see is indeed the “last gasp of history;” they see that the entire terrestrial globe has been transformed into a field of experimentation for the Thing, a planetary Camp, but without any Red Cross to salvage it from what might happen—no, the whole world is at the mercy of the Thing’s dual desert, its digital desert, its snow/sand desert, the very desert that will strike here in approximately twenty-four hours.

This is what they see, what Judith Seigny shows them, what the men of the Ring have filmed: The drone is endowed with a powerful multifrequency optical system that can be focused across long distances, and it is also equipped with four wide-lens microcameras attached to tether cables, which it can lower on command to very low altitudes, four or five hundred meters above the earth, a drop of around eighty thousand feet. Battered children and adolescents, limbs cut from living bodies, gang rapes, eviscerations, castrations; people hanged with barbed wire or drowned in sewers or septic tanks, burned alive in tubs filled with gasoline or sulfur; women hunted down and put in cages, raped mercilessly, mutilated,

tortured, kept as sexual slaves in arenas, railway stations, on highway interchanges and airport tarmacs before being cut apart with chain saws or plunged into vats of sulfuric acid; elderly people executed en masse with machine guns or thrown alive into rivers; the wounded, the ill, and the handicapped thrown out of hospital windows and finished off with machetes and bayonets; babies piled up and sprayed with kerosene and set aflame, or impaled on jutting metal shanks; men and women forced to participate in the torture of their own children; decapitated heads paraded through the streets on hundreds of metal pikes by joyous crowds of rabble; mutilated corpses turned into puppets, nailed down, branded, hung, their limbs passed from hand to hand like so many toys. Yes, thinks Yuri, THIS IS MAN: Vatican City in flames, ravaged by hordes of looters leaving piles of shit and puddles of urine on the altars, the ancient and medieval statues, the Doric and Corinthian columns, the Roman arcades and Gothic naves, while their armed cohorts impale, crucify, shoot, decapitate, dismember, crush, scorch, and burn anyone who has the misfortune to cross their paths. Flying cameras are equipped with high-fidelity, multidirectional, long-distance zoom lenses and sound recorders. The screams, cries, pleas for mercy, tears, wails of babies, supplications, sobs, insults, prayers, exhortations, laughs—it is all there. The Crucifixion of the First Rome, the Rome of Saint Peter, in digital high definition. Transatmospheric microcameras were one of the last technologies developed by the U.S. Army before the disappearance of the United States of America; their precision is completely reliable. The Tiber is flowing red with blood; the flames leap in all their thermal variations; the sky is purplish black like an exposed, diseased heart. The faces are visible, though they cannot be seen straight-on; the details are clean, as stark as a medicolegal autopsy report. They are the Camp Doctors. The last agonized gasp of human civilization has been recorded perfectly. The World has filmed its own end. The machine eyes from space have done their job. The face of humanity is there for them to see, in its entirety, just as it is—that is, just as it is no more.

The horizon is choked with a thick screen of black smoke above a fire-colored line like the Devil's smile. The Eternal City has fallen. Man has been delivered into the hands of the worst possible foe: himself.

The Abomination is spreading.

The state-of-the-art optics of the flying microcameras have recorded and then diffused these images all over the Ring. The anonymous eyes of the

machines have observed the horror unblinking and transmitted it to the collective anonymity of the orbital nation. They have seen. They have *memorized*. They are the witnesses of the Great Testimony, the witnesses of the Last Martyrdom. They are the *last witnesses*.

There are images it would be better not to see. There are images that are worth more unseen. There are images officially prohibited from being seen, even for a fraction of a second.

Link knows it, just as he knows all the rest. During the three days and three nights he has spent shut away in the hangar, he has, more than anything else, been listening to the Light. Listening to the Voice, the Voice rising from his own electric body, his metaorganism dancing with quarks and neutrinos, and he can now see what will succeed the Radio of the Territory.

It is so simple. A Led Zeppelin that will turn the sedentary Grand Dynamite Audio into a squadron of electro-aerial migratory birds, a fleet of high-altitude sonic bombardiers, the air force of exiles rooted everywhere, everywhere the terrestrial magnetic field is present—that is, everywhere on Earth.

No one can see—for now, in any case—how the Light and he are going to proceed, in concert, to create the Neomachine. *I'm in control of the secrets now*, he thinks. In less than twenty-four hours the Territory will be hit by the double storm; it will probably last two or three days, maybe more. There is enough time to finish building the Neomachine—or the *Hypermachine*, as he calls it sometimes—while remaining hidden within the hybrid shadows of ice and sand. No eye can penetrate the mystery that is already at work, beginning to draw new plans, new diagrams, new codes, a whole new language, and channeling energy through them—channeling Most Holy Electricity.

No eye can capture the Light; nobody can see the face of the Machine before its completion. In a week at most, he will unveil it to the community of H.M.V. His Neomachine will be able to fight the Thing on its own territory; it will unleash its implacable D-day, its “Overlord” plan. It will storm the beaches and destroy its Capital, wherever that might be, because that is how he has designed it, with the help of the Cognitive Light: the Hypermachine will be attracted by the superprinciple of the Thing just like

a missile is irresistibly drawn to a heat source, like a carnivore tracks its prey, like a needle caught by a magnet.

I am the Black Box of the World to be restored, the World to be reinvented, the World to be transfigured.

I am a process based on true infinity; now I must simultaneously encompass all its successive units.

Never again will anything be imprisoned in the dungeon of the indefinite, uninterrupted numeric series, that eternal recurrence that is neither eternal nor a recurrence—a *resumption*—of anything. Only the concreteness of matter, the very relative elasticity of time and space, the finiteness of earthly substances will produce the illusion of a series of discontinuous actions, but it will be nothing; there may be specific phases of the process, but they will be on the surface.

It will all be genetic.

40 > *ELECTRIC LADYLAND*

True wars sometimes happen out of the sight of those who are fighting them. Some wars are so secret that the people fighting them are unaware of their existence. Some wars are so obvious that they assault the eyes, blinding you with their *realness*.

There are twelve thousand functioning radios spread across the Territory. They say the necessary length of exposure varies according to the individual, so the sheriff's men distributing the radios are giving clear, simple instructions that carry the weight of law: for some people, just listening to a snippet of music is enough; others might need to listen to the same piece several times, and still others might require one or more hearings of different pieces. It is up to you to find your best use of 1001 MHz. When you are immunized, you will know it. It is like a program being restarted; you will feel a sort of spark inside you and all your symptoms of breakdown—alphanumeric or biosystemic—will have disappeared. When that happens, give or trade your radio to anyone you like, as long as it is to another resident of the Territory.

They say that more than twenty-five thousand people have been immunized in the first month. But the HMTV radios are becoming the most costly merchandise in the history of business. The Territory's own economy is slowing down the decontamination; the Territory's own economy is slowing down the plan; it is slowing down the war against the Thing. The Territory's own economy is threatening itself. As Campbell remarked recently to Yuri: "I'm surprised that someone like Sheriff Langlois believed for even a minute that the majority of the people in Grand Junction would follow his order to distribute the 'savior radios' *for free*. It won't take long for that to become the business to end all businesses."

Twenty-five thousand, maybe thirty thousand—between 8 and 10 percent of the Territory's population. That's not so bad, thinks Yuri. It's a beginning; it gives us an idea, at least, that we can fight the Thing. Of

course there's still a lot to do, and Link is undoubtedly doing it in his hangar.

Yuri can feel the change. He can feel that the era of secrets is changing—but not because they are disappearing.

They are simply changing hands.

To fight a war, you need a battlefield. The Territory is that battlefield. Neonature is moving on to the final phase of acceleration.

When the two storms finally collide over the former American-Quebecois border, everything else the Territory's inhabitants have ever experienced in terms of the fury of the elements dwindles away to nothing. This, this is an assault straight out of Hell.

The shock is indescribable. Without Campbell's science, their cabin would never have resisted this attack from the sky. Despite numerous security measures, Sheriff Langlois cannot prevent the deaths of a couple of elderly residents, or of two children from the same family, or the complete disappearance of a third.

"Two hundred and twenty kilometers an hour," says Campbell, looking at his anemometer at the storm's height, on the second day. "Two hundred and twenty-two, to be precise. I've never seen anything like it, even in the Territory."

The Great Blizzard in a head-on collision with the Gale of Sand. Silica against ice, silica with ice, silica in the ice, and vice versa. The snow is black, the sand is gold, the sky is white, the sky is invisible. Atmospheric machines in massive convulsion, a fourth-type encounter: ecology against ecology, world against world, contact made to form a single reality—cold shadows of Arctic air, hot shadows of desert wind. The whirling whiteness from the north, the cyclonic darkness from the south.

And in the middle, the Territory. The battlefield of the last world.

In a place like Grand Junction, you have to remember that everything—absolutely everything—is a trap, a developing machine.

In the Territory, the Territory itself is the trap. And now it is also a battlefield for climatic elements clashing in the domain of the visible, even though sometimes nothing at all can be seen. And it is the theater of a much more secret clash—a war waged in the subterranean depths of the invisible,

there where men cannot go. Neither men nor animals. No one. Not even blizzards and sandstorms.

This war is being fought underneath the Territory, like the rhizomic structure of one of its many poisonous plants.

It is being fought out of human—and even mechanical—sight. It is being fought out of the reach of the living beings huddled in their shelters as neonature transforms the world, in apparent chaos that is actually very controlled.

Silica and ice.

Welcome to the Territory, welcome to the land that came from nowhere, welcome to the Territory; you will see, the sand is everywhere, welcome to the Territory, welcome to the new ice age, welcome to the Territory, the world is an old machine, Man is his own garbage.

The words will come more and more easily now, Yuri knows. The retreat forced on them by the neoworld has allowed him to continue his reading. Several volumes of theology and philosophy from the Library are stacked at the foot of his bed.

The double storm is pummeling the Territory; ice and sand have come to copulate here, to experiment here with the Post-World, the one in which Post-Humanity will live. But now the words are being etched within him, wherever he is, whatever he is experiencing, under any conditions. Even a huge double storm.

Snow and sand, ice and fire, cold and heat. The Thing is trying to annihilate opposites, Yuri suddenly realizes. To do that, it is forcing them to confront one another ecologically, to exhaust their energy reserves and cause them to die, leaving behind them this neoworld—median, flat, totally equalized, monometeorological—for us to live in.

Climatic chaos is only one phase of the process, like boiling water, and its Brownian movement will end in a state of equilibrium, once all the liquid has evaporated.

Climatic chaos is a stage; it is not the goal or even a means of exterminating the human species more quickly. It is just the period preliminary to the establishment of a total ecological and climatic order, perfectly harmonized, pacified, homogenized.

A sort of Paradise.

It took God seven days to create the World. It takes the double storm only half that time to recreate the Territory in its image.

Paradise: it reveals itself to them in the early morning of the fourth day, after the silica-ice storm gradually dies away during the third night. This is the newworld the Thing is planning for the whole planet.

Paradise: the newworld in its terminal phase. Sand and ice have blended into a sort of grayish mud that covers almost all the vegetation in the Territory. Even the hardiest weeds, the most poisonous plants have not survived. The predatory flora, too, was only a stage. A stage of the Fall—but now, we are in the Post-Fall. Only the trees that weren't uprooted by the winds, large bushes, plants with aerial rhizomes, and a few particularly stout perennials are visible. All the rest have disappeared, replaced by this thick layer of icy sand that, under the rays of the spring sun, quickly melts into dull chrome-colored mud streaked with rusty brown. This is the new ecology planned for the devolving Post-Humanity. The equalization of hot and cold by overall, tempered lukewarmness; the equalization of the tropics and the Arctic via their mutually draining encounter; the equalization of desert and ice field through their systemic hybridization.

Paradise: a world of mud, thinks Yuri. The primitive mud of ancestral pagan beliefs and absolute monotheism. A monochromatic world, monoclimatic and monogeological, where any manifestation of Beauty will, by nature, be impossible. A world of mud. A unidimensional world where all differences will be obliterated. A world of mud. *Planet Mud*. The gray world. A world without shadows or light; a world of permanent half-light. Neither hot nor cold. Temperate, balanced, tepid. Paradise, undoubtedly.

The Paradise of Post-Humanity.

It is beneath the ground of this gray all-encompassing Paradise that the secret war is raging. While the Arctic blizzard and the Midwestern simoon ravaged the Territory in concert, in the fury of unleashed elements, while the gray mud formed, while tumult reigned, while the sand-mud mixture covered the land, in the silence and serenity of numbers It continued to act, patiently pursuing its work of destruction, reaching a new stage of its offensive.

Its offensive against language.

The attack is no longer aimed at human “hardware platforms” and their individuation; it is no longer aimed at the language incarnate in man. This phase, the Third Fall, is still in progress, but it is drawing to an end. Now the next one must be planned. The neoworld, where neohumanity will live, must be prepared. There will be the mud of sand and ice. There will be millions of deaths per day. There will be the numeric recycling of bodies.

And there will be the new communication.

The new communication between men, the posthumans whose collective immortality will give them quasi-divine status, will be of a radically new type. It will no longer depend on language, which will have been destroyed, but on the direct neuroconnection of each brain via the neohuman biological network; but in order for that to happen, the extermination of verbal transmission alone will not be enough. It will be absolutely necessary—even before having done away with human cortexes and their linguistic systems—to find a way to prevent any *written transmission*. Because written transmission is memory, and moreover it is a global text in perpetual transformation. Written transmission is a brain in itself. It structures and illuminates thought. It is capable of bridging life and death. It can record names, stories, events. It can destroy all the Anome is doing. In order for the neoworld to have any hope of lasting, it must annihilate all preceding history. It must annihilate every individual, destroy every thought, every possibility of thought. It must abolish even the smallest *trace* of language.

The men of PaperPlan who have just emerged from their homes see that their entire stock is now unusable; books, journals, newspapers, brochures—everything has been erased. Everything. Not a letter remains. The pages are as blank as if nothing were ever printed on them. As the day continues, the men of the township will receive disparate information from all over Junkville, telling them that the phenomenon is expanding. In Neo Pepsico the jars of jam, tubes of medication, sacks of grain, and instruction manuals have had all their descriptives erased in the space of a few days. The same thing has happened in Ultrabox and some parts of Vortex Townships.

The men of Junkville still do not know what is happening. They do not know a war is raging beneath their feet, on the rhizomic face of the world, where light is nothing but a chemical substratum.

They cannot know, because even if they understood the meaning of this attack against written marks, they would not be able to guess exactly what

the attack is in fact aimed at. They would not suspect the presence of an enemy of this Thing that is erasing language.

This adversary, this Enemy of the Thing the people of Junkville are not even aware exists, this holdout opponent, this final dissident, is fighting its own war in the subterranean depths of the neoworld.

His Machine is ready. It is a beautiful machine. A war machine. A military device. A trap.

It is the most beautiful machine ever created since the invention of machines—that is, since the invention of man.

Light. Every good trap should be able to function in daylight, Campbell often says.

Thanks to the powers he received from his nongenetic creation, for Link this paradigm is virtually inverted: all light should conceal a good trap.

He has succeeded.

Six full days. No randomness in the numerology of creating universes. Six days to recreate a World—or, rather, six days to prevent it from being recreated in the image of neohumanity.

Yes, he has succeeded.

The Neomachine. A Machine of the fourth type. Neither biological nor mechanical nor symbolic, but a disjunctive synthesis permanently renewed by Light, by the Most Holy Electricity become a principle of absolute individuation.

The Hypermachine: at once the antinome of the Metastructure *and* its inverted principle—the Thing. The Hypermachine, the third party, the projection outside the incarcerating space of the dialectic. The Hypermachine, the cognitive weapon, the absolute enemy of Post-Humanity, the *Enola Gay* come to atomize its neoworld of universal mud through the performative action of electric music, the Music of Electricity, the Music in which Electricity is the principle of individuation, the Music that will cause the electric body of the whole planet to sing.

Today is the morning of the Seventh Day; the elements themselves are at rest. I will keep the hangar closed and let the world continue its course. Tomorrow I will show the last humans in the Territory what Logos can do against the Thing; I will show them the Neomachine that has come to fight

the neoecology. I will show them the Hypermachine that will completely destroy Post-Humanity.

I will show them the Light.

The Light when it becomes Fire.

* * *

Morning comes.

The eighth, by Link de Nova's count.

Another morning on which people gather around the hangar. It has been five full days since the beginning of the storm. The fifth day of the hybrid neoecology, the fifth day of the world of mud.

Morning has come.

The morning of the New Machine.

The morning of the last free men.

The morning of the last finite numbers.

Morning has come. The morning of the transfinite aleph, the morning of light, the morning of the metaliving.

Link de Nova's morning has come.

The morning of the Great Amazement, the transmutation of the Energy into Words, the morning the machine has been surpassed by itself.

Every man and woman who has come from almost all the communities of Heavy Metal Valley can see, glowing golden in the morning light, what emerges from Link de Nova's hangar, floating a few meters above the earth, haloed with solar light pulsing from quicksilver veins. The levels of fluidity and viscosity of this matter-that-is-not-matter would thwart any attempt at measuring them—rhes and poises demultiplied in infinite differentials, permanently reversing their asymmetry. Nothing is really stable at the heart of this hyperluminous plasma, which is neither gas nor solid nor liquid *nor plasma*.

All of them—Yuri McCoy, Chrysler Campbell, Judith Seigny, her parents, Sheriff Langlois and all his deputies, the two androids from the Ring, Francisco Alpini, Milan Djordjevic, Professor Zarkovsky, Sydia Nova, Father Newman, Lady van Harpel, the Sommervilles, the dog Balthazar, and dozens of other families, dozens of other couples, dozens of other solitary individuals, and even a large purple crow that has just

alighted on the top of a pile of smashed cars—all of them are facing the incomprehensible, the unknowable, the inexplicable, the impossible.

They are facing the future of the Machine. They are facing the future of Humanity.

Later, Yuri will ask himself how to describe such an apparition, such an “object,” such a phenomenon.

It is not natural—but it is not artificial, either. It is, again, the disjunctive synthesis of two species whose operation is infinitely maintained by this globe of active light framing intangible perimeters.

Object? What object? Where does matter begin? Where does light begin? Where does energy stop? Where does infinity end?

The first words that come to him are: Welcome to the Territory, welcome to the place where only surreal is a possibility, welcome to the Territory, you face the fact that everything here can be done, welcome to the Territory, welcome to the very last unknown identity, welcome to the Territory, as you see, a new world has just begun.

There is a sort of poetry in what is happening before their eyes. But what kind of poetry, if not an unknown form, a form not yet created—because what it is saying, describing, evoking, has no recognized existence? Any religious prohibitions notwithstanding, how does one paint God? It does not make any sense; any representation of infinity is impossible by its very nature.

For that matter, how does one convey what is a notch below God—a phenomenon that incontestably belongs to the order of the divine, the *supernatural*, or to one of its manifestations here on Earth?

How does one paint an angel?

How does one portray the Ark of the Covenant?

And seeing Link standing at the hangar door, the black Gibson hanging from its strap around his neck, Yuri realizes that you cannot paint God. You cannot describe an angel. You cannot depict the Ark of the Covenant and its Tabernacle.

But there is a way to make contact with them. Through the Word, of course. But the Word is not necessarily made up of *words*.

The Word is the Voice. It is a Song. It is thus a Body. It is music capable of reaching the far-distant stars.

And this is very precisely what Link has understood. It is what he will now put into practice. It is what he will cast upon the world.

The cosmic Antenna, the human Monad, the Neomachine; the Ark, as he calls it.

It is not entirely mechanical, but neither is it entirely biological. It is a multidimensional form of light at different levels of “density;” perhaps even at different levels of speed, of mass; all paradoxes are imaginable. It is holding a strange structure in place: a black double orb, two large circles, one enclosed inside the other at a 90-degree angle, forming a schematic globe, the inside of which is clearly visible in the powerful solar light.

The studio. *The whole studio.*

All the instruments. The guitars, the Dobros, the mandolins, the synthesizers, the samplers, the sequencers, the various keyboards, the electric violins and acoustic cellos, the saxophones and trumpets, the basses, the rhythm boxes, the microphones, the mixing consoles, the recorders, the amplifiers, the speakers, the digital disk readers, the microcomputers, the racks and effects pedals, the headphones, the cables, the electric transformers, the radio transmission station—even the huge church organ is atop the Machine with all its jutting tubes. Everything has become an organic unit, a single meta-instrument that vibrates and pulses, a cardiac ventricle amid the swarming photons. It is glowing with energy, as if the fire-colored halo is taking form in the assembled machines. And Yuri realizes that there is no “as if” about it; he realizes that this is very exactly what is taking place, that this is the precise nature of the process at work.

It is so beautiful. It is so perfect. It is so simple, he thinks.

He has understood. He knows what is happening. He knows how Link plans to use it against the Thing. He knows Link has found the way to fight it on the global, planetary, *worldwide* scale—counterworld against neoworld.

Hostilities have only just begun, he thinks, admiring the slow ascension of the flying structure above HMTV, and then its majestic curving turn in the direction of Xenon Ridge, where it ends by positioning itself a dozen meters above the line of the crest, not far from a windmill it floods with its luminescence. It is Link with his guitar, connected to a small high-frequency radio transmitter, who controls the Machine’s movements. It is Link who is watching over the Territory now. Link, the Conductor of the Camp Orchestra.

The Antenna dominates Humvee, and the cosmodrome, and the northern part of Grand Junction. It is nearly facing the Monolith Hills strip. It is in direct contact with the Hotel Laika.

The Antenna is watching. Soon it will begin transmitting. And when it does transmit, it will not be to twelve thousand transistor radios scattered across the Territory. When it does transmit, this Antenna of the Counter-World, it will be on all frequencies, across the terrestrial magnetic field as if within a network; each human will become the radio receptor of the Grand Dynamite Audio, transmuted into a sonic cruise missile. It will transmit for all of humanity that survives. It will transmit for all the identification numbers awaiting it in the Camp-World.

41 > *TYRANNY AND MUTATION*

“I think the situation is getting beyond our control. What’s been happening for almost ten days now is not normal at all.”

“Listen, Silverskin, I spent two full weeks in the west of the Territory. I planted several evangelical missions; I named one Edgar Dorset to fill the same position as yours for the county of Grand Funk Railroad. Now the next phase is Deadlink; in view of its importance I should make it a diocese of its own—despite the administrative red tape left over from the Previous World. The rest doesn’t matter to me, for now.”

“Did you leave him any capsules? That’s not wise. And let me remind you that the remissions are increasing by the thousands.”

“Silverskin, Dorset will be the bishop of Grand Funk Railroad just like you are the bishop of Junkville; so he will be authorized to distribute the Anome’s capsules. As for the problem you just mentioned, rest assured that it’s a marginal epiphenomenon compared to the Anome’s power.”

“Several thousand sudden remissions in less than six days without even the use of their fucking radios? Tell me again that nothing abnormal is happening.”

“Do you know the rhythm of the Anome’s progression in this alphanumeric mutation? In less than six years, nine-tenths of what is left of humanity now will have disappeared. Those that survive will be the ones that have followed the Law of the Anome, the Law I have come to pronounce.”

“Mr. Cybion, our church is in very early days yet, and I’m afraid the people up in the north of the Territory are already working on a vast conspiracy that—”

“Silverskin, my first apostle, my first bishop, please don’t worry yourself so much about these little people tinkering with the Metastructure. A surprise is indeed coming, but not one that will help them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m talking about the rumors we are hearing sometimes in the Territory these days about written signs being erased.”

“Yes, I know, some people from Neo Pepsico told me about it. It must be connected—”

“Obviously it is connected, Silverskin, because it is part of the same thing. The Anome desires an elite, handpicked few to form its neohumanity; the alphanumeric mutation will take only human organisms. It is just one phase of the process.”

“What other organisms are you hinting at?”

“I’m talking about books. The Anome considers them living organisms. It is proceeding with a nullified infinite numerization against them.”

“Nullified infinite numerization?”

“Yes. In simpler terms, it is numerizing them infinitely in the vacuum; it is turning them digital, turning them into binary code, but there are no more ones—only zeros, infinitely looped upon themselves.”

“Books as living organisms?”

“Of course. For the Anome they are nomad brains—purely scriptural, but brains all the same. And the alphanumeric mutation concerns everything related to cognition and language. Verbal as well as written. You should understand its way of functioning, Mr. Silverskin; the Anome is using the different phases of its transformation of the world as selective tests of those that will belong to neohumanity when the transformation is complete. If it is destroying written language as well as verbal, it is because it plans to modify our methods of communication profoundly. Language will be obsolete under the Anome; we are forming an unindividuated network, and soon we will each be able to know what everyone else is thinking. We will become a global entity. *We will be the world*, Mr. Silverskin.”

“And these unexplained remissions? And that fucking Territory Radio? What are we going to do about the HMTV men?”

Alan Cybion I’s laugh pierces the air like a gunshot.

“We aren’t going to do anything, Silverskin. Nothing. In a few months the Anome will kill half a million people every day all over the world, and the annual growth rate is quasi-exponential; a few spontaneous remissions and ten or twelve thousand radios scattered across the Territory aren’t going to stop the process. Only I and the Anome can save humanity; we are the only way out. Neohumanity will be what can survive the Anome, and the Anome will be what lets it survive.”

“The Anome will make us survive it?”

The same laugh, exploding dryly in the air.

“Yes! It is the mutation and it is the selection; I told you. The simplest evolutionism. It imposes its conditions, to use the language of the Territory.”

“I see,” replies Silverskin. “It is both the illness and the vaccine, the poison and the antidote.”

“Exactly,” says Cybion I, flashing a wide smile illuminated by all the shadows in the universe. “Simple evolution, you see. That is why it is a world, the natural biocybernetic network of neohumanity. That is why it is Good *and* Evil, a coherent duality, and one assigned to a single goal: the survival and transformation of the human race by itself—that is, by the Anome become the new ontological foundation of this humanity. It’s symbiosis, Silverskin. The Anome is multiple by definition; it cannot individuate in us in the form of a singularity, but rather as an interface to itself. It cannot be totally in each one of us because it is demultiplied in each of us, in a generic form. But that is its strength—because in exchange, it offers biological, terrestrial, real immortality.”

Silverskin does not answer. Their church can already count several thousand believers in Junkville, and Cybion I has gone himself to evangelize in the Ontarian townships. He can provide hundreds of “anomic” capsules per day. “*My body is a machine producing the Anome; that is virtually its reason for being,*” the android said one day, laughing, this android who is at once the sacred Pope of the Anomian church and the King of what he calls Utopia, this newworld already superimposing itself on the Territory and its environs, and soon enough on the rest of the world.

Utopia, the World of the Anome, Utopia, the placeless World, the World without history or geography, the equalized World, the World of perfect ecology. The world where man is nature itself.

The day of Silverskin’s sacrament, Cybion I made him the following proposal: “*The Anome wants no hierarchy and no verticality except a few levels of function in the Church, such as yours. You will all be equal in the Anomian network; I am the only ‘direct’ agent of its manifestation, but I, too, am nothing but a vector, an intermediary. I am what is permitting the Anome to become Humanity and Humanity to become the Anome, precisely because I am not quite human, but just enough so to be able to carry their two principles. I, too, am dual by nature, you see.*”

Silverskin contemplates the township of Little Congo spread out around his mobile home; a purple crow is soaring northwest in the sky. He follows its calm and sinuous flight with his eyes all the way to the western limits of the city; he can see to Autostrada and Carbon City, to Vortex Townships, and even as far as New Arizona. He can see the world as it was left by the double storm; the mud of sand and snow stretches everywhere, beyond the visible horizon; it gleams with a dull gray-bronze tint, covering the landscape with its uniform frost. He can see the kingdom they are beginning to establish on Earth.

If anything, or anyone, is capable of following the evolution of the war being waged on the hidden side of the world, the dark side of the Earth, it is the purple crow that has just left the heights of Little Congo to return north, from where it came after watching the strange, glowing bird fly over the metal city. Birds' brains are equipped with a gyroscopic neural device that permits them to "sense" the presence and exact location of the magnetic conduction lines that irrigate the planet; it is thanks to this sixth sense that they can cross oceans and entire continents, even hemispheres, without deviating even a centimeter off course.

The purple crow of the Territory is an old predator, clever and fast. Instinctively, it follows the fluctuations of the force fields in the Earth's crust; it harnesses the two opposing energies tracing their rival diagrams in the invisible world underground, where only creatures of the sky can go, where evolution and catastrophe are planned, where the electricity of the poles lives, doubly polarized energy from the heart-in-fusion of the Earth.

The two forces are in fact completely inverted in a systematic way; even the purple crow understands this in its own manner: a force is rising from the blackest depths, becoming visible little by little in the form of this new nature to which the predatory bird, it knows, must adapt. The other force comes from the aerial spheres of Light and has crept into the rhizomic shadows in order to subvert the opposing process; very probably, the bird will have to adapt to this, too.

The visible and the invisible, in both senses of the words, are meeting here, in the Territory over which the crow is flying.

The Territory is an interface—or so Yuri McCoy, one of the men who lives in the metal city for which the crow is heading, would say.

The Territory is the writing surface of two antinomic processes; it is an Interworld. The crow could not understand these concepts even if it understood the words. But it would approve of them.

Because that is very precisely what it sees, as it soars toward the cosmodrome.

It is a sheriff's deputy named Fernand Claymore, who works as Bob Chamberlain's partner, who discovers the first clue as he returns from patrolling Apollo Drive near the cosmodrome. The necro Triads are still busy on the Monolith Hills strip and around the old Enterprise aerostation; despite the emissions of the Territory Radio and the launch of Link de Nova's new machine, the expansion of the Third Fall is still happening, a non-viral epidemic, more invisible and more lethal than any microscopic bacteria. Thousands of bodies are piling up in the cold-storage chambers of the Triads; thousands of bodies are clogging the streets; thousands of bodies are awaiting the arrival of the necro cleaners as they lie decomposing in their cabins and makeshift shelters.

And Fernand Claymore, discovering this clue, does not really understand what he is seeing; in any case, he makes no connection just then between this local microevent, just a bit bizarre, and the progressing extermination of humanity. He cannot make the connection. It is a secret relationship of which the world itself knows nothing.

"You mean someone thought they'd have a little fun erasing the writing on the windmill sign? Why?" asks Bob Chamberlain as they head back toward the city, their duty accomplished.

"I don't know, Bob," answers Claymore, pensively. "It's funny; I wouldn't say the signs were erased."

"What do you mean? How else could they do it—they're titanium-composite signs."

"Yeah, that's what I—I should have shown you the thing. The sign was totally smooth, completely blank. It wasn't like someone had just scrubbed out the writing."

"What are you saying?"

"The sign looked as if it had just come from the factory, brand-new, before the final embossing, before the inscription of warnings or street names. Like nothing had ever been printed on it."

* * *

The purple crow settles into a glide and then flies higher to clear Xenon Ridge. It soars over the windmills turning silently on the mesas like so many totem poles guarding the valley. And there is the luminous object floating above the rocky butte dominating the city of Grand Junction. The purple crow understands that the magnetic waves it can see coursing under the earth are connected to the poles, of course, but they are also linked to this machine that the humans in the metal city have built. Its presence completes the diagram: these earthly electric lines are the same as the ones that run through the Van Halen Belt at the edge of the atmosphere, where no bird can go, but from which they draw a large part of their driving energy and their sense of navigation. The other force, the one running like a dark rhizome beneath the surface of the Earth, is not really the same as the one birds have known for millions of years.

The subterranean force resembles a magnetic field, but it is not the earthly electromagnetic one. It has branches like underground roots, but it is not a plant. Its dark density is like the blackest coal, but it is not a mineral. The purple crow lacks the cognitive ability to identify it. It understands difference. It understands evidence. It understands the frontal collision between two worlds, and of that the purple Territory crow does not know what to think. Its predator's brain has difficulty even grasping the idea of *two* worlds. But it cannot perceive as an abstraction what its senses permit it to see. Animals that do not rely on their senses rarely survive more than two or three days.

There are two forces. The two entities are worlds. The Territory is the place where these two worlds have met.

Animals that do not rely on their senses cannot survive more than three days; those that do not rely on their instinct have a life expectancy of only a few hours.

The old Territory crow's instincts rise up inside it in a vociferous clamor. Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen to the humans in the Territory. Something that has not yet hit them.

Something is probably going to happen to all the humans on Earth. Something they have forgotten.

Something that no animal, in the Territory or elsewhere, ever forgets: the world changes with disconcerting ease. The process is even simpler when

the world itself is in control of it.

* * *

It is the two androids from the Ring who mention the phenomenon first. They “feel” its manifestation, just as they can “feel” the enemy android somewhere in the Territory. Link de Nova’s mother is probably experiencing something similar, but she isn’t sharing it with anyone, except perhaps in deepest secrecy. In any case, she is not the one who comes to find Yuri and Campbell.

“An antiscriptural attack?” gasps Chrysler, disconcerted.

“Yes, we’ve been discussing it with Professor Zarkovsky and Mr. Djordjevic. It is the other side of its attack against language. The last phase seemed to spare fourth-generation androids, but what is happening now is different. It ‘unwrites’ writing. We can feel, acutely, microprogramming routines—nonessential ones, for now—being erased from the biological nanogenerators created by our artificial genetic code. This offensive will not touch humans directly, unlike the other side. Androids and humans—we find ourselves up against each of the two alternate faces. For us, it is numbers transformed into written language on which our existence depends. For you, it is language as speech that can be digitized and that lies at the core of your singularity, your voice, your senses, your difference. The Thing is hitting both faces. It wants and intends total domination.”

“Do you agree with us, as Link said you did, that this ‘Thing’ is not an exterior entity capable of incarnating itself, but rather the demultiplication of the disincarnation of the human species, transforming all singularities into generic digital form?”

“Yes. The second phase, the antiscriptural attack, will not spare any android surviving on Earth. That is part of its plan.”

“A plan? Well spotted. A plan necessitates a person who thinks it up,” says Yuri. “I think, more and more, that the Thing, this devolutive global mutation, has managed to implant itself into a human singularity. I mean, that’s what I thought until now. But thanks to you, I understand. It isn’t a human singularity in which the Thing has individuated; even to a small extent, that would be impossible for it.”

“What, then?”

“A fourth-generation artificial human like the two of you, and like Link’s mother—and like this unknown android whose presence you can sense. Are you following me?”

They are following him perfectly.

They won’t have a chance against this artificial human, even though they have come from the Orbital Ring—or maybe *because* they have come from it. They will not be able to fight an android in whom the devolutionary mutation has ontologically crystallized.

In a manner analogous to the creation of the “natural” neohumanity, the unknown android, through its “personal” relationship with the Thing, is, perhaps, going to initiate a line of neo-androids living in harmony with the rest of the population. The plan must include eliminating all the previous androids, so that humanity will consist only of a single huge *registered trademark*, monomodular, monoserial, of “human” androids. It is easy to see the goal: an overall lack of differentiation among all humanity, the annihilation of any individual singularity.

Yuri muses that the Thing’s project is growing clearer day by day. A perfect equalization of everything, of the whole world, even of the less-visible things it contains.

Everyone equal in everything. Everything equal to nothing.

Paradise on New Earth.

“In order to overcome the double ontological constraint that prevents it from incarnating,” explains Yuri, “the postmechanical entity is resolving the problem by disincarnating men through the numerization of their bio-physiques; and now, wanting to truly imitate God, it has decided to copy the principle of individuation—without, of course, acting on humans. So it is choosing to demultiply inside a surviving android, one it is ‘updating’ in its image, in order to make this android its interface with neohumanity. Its mission is to prevent the Coming of the Kingdom and to update Link de Nova’s remission processes, and to transform man into its image as fast as possible. It has to destroy the other androids, because they are ‘creations of the creation,’ and thus direct competition for the coming neohumanity, which will be a sort of fifth-generation android, and above all it has to destroy the Scriptures. The Thing, Post-Humanity, will do anything to destroy the Word and eliminate even the slightest possibility of its incarnating on this Earth, in any form.”

The two astronauts do not reply. Campbell simply says, “Welcome to the Territory,” with his usual dry humor, the corner of his mouth quirking and his expression saying to Yuri: “You’re talking like a Christian now.”

And Yuri must admit that Chrysler is right. If he is talking like a Christian, it is because his language, too, has been irresistibly transformed during these past few months. *If I speak the language of Christians, he thinks, shaken by an interior seismic shock wave, maybe it is because the Christians are speaking it through me. Maybe it is because this is the language that is individuating in me, completely. Maybe it is just a sign that I am converting.*

I am converting to Christianity even though Rome has fallen, the Vatican is destroyed, and the last Christians alive on this Earth are all gathered here, in this city built of extinct machines.

I am converting to Christianity though Christianity has ended. I am converting to Christianity even though I have twelve deaths on my conscience.

In the end, he admits, he is a Man of the Territory, and whatever happens, he will remain so. It is the Law of Bronze. These are the rules and regulations of life in Grand Junction.

In the Camp-World, hope arises only after everything else has been destroyed.

“There is a fundamental difference between my first strategy, the one using the Territory Radio, and what I am doing with the Neomachine,” says Link de Nova. “We only have a limited number of radios and they have to be distributed as troubleshooting objects. But the Antenna has no need of troubleshooting objects. The Ark, the Neomachine, acts directly, *immediately*, just like the Thing, on human bodies and minds, passing through terrestrial magnetic lines, which are also aerospatial, as you know if you’ve ever seen the aurora borealis. I’ve decided to go back and use the Thing’s methods against itself; my Antenna imitates it. Unlike the radios, whose numbers are finite and whose distribution is random and subject to conditions beyond our control, the Neomachine’s influence increases via the principle of infinite division. It will double regularly in intensity as well, and in the scope of its power. In two or three weeks it will make a complete circuit of the Earth.”

“There’s a new problem, Link,” says Yuri simply. “The Professor and we have been told by the astronauts already; your father has been despondent in his trailer since yesterday.”

“What’s happening? I know HMT is completely immunized. It’s the Fortress, Yuri.”

“This is different, Link. So different that we didn’t see it coming.”

“What is it?”

“The last mutation of the Thing, the numeric devolution ... it isn’t only attacking humans.”

“You mean it could be a danger to the few surviving androids?”

He’s thinking of his mother, of course, says Yuri to himself. And of the two astronauts. But that isn’t the problem.

“Yes, Link, but that’s just a consequence. It isn’t attacking the mechanical or the biological or even the symbolic—it’s attacking the disjunctive synthesis of the three.”

“Language. We already know that, Yuri.”

“Yes, but I told you, it isn’t only attacking living organisms.”

“Then what? Only living organisms have language.”

“Yes, but only human organisms, bionic or not, know how to *write* language. Only humans know how to communicate *in writing*. Do you see what I mean?”

Two or three seconds pass, during which time hangs as if from an atomic bomber.

“No. Not that.”

“Yes,” says Yuri, simply. “That. A direct threat to the Library. To *all* libraries.”

The first books attacked are, in order: the *Adversus Haereses* by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon; the *Homilies on Genesis* by Origenes, and the *De Trinitate* by Saint Hilary of Poitiers. When Zarkovsky tells them the news, Yuri knows that the Thing is no longer acting in a random manner at all. It is following a plan. From quantitative, random, and numeric massification/annihilation, it has moved on to qualitative destruction based on the omnipresence of the zero, the null figure, the empty whole. From mass killing carried at random consequential to the human multitude—

turned—biological scrap heap, it has moved on to a surgical attack against written singularity.

When, at the end of the afternoon, the Professor tells them that *On the Division of Nature* by Erigena, the *Treatise on Incarnation* by Jean Cassien, and a work on the Holy Spirit by Basil of Caesarea have been taken in turn, Yuri is not even particularly surprised at the Thing's strategy.

Now the war is total; it involves every detail of existence—physical, mental, concrete, symbolic, cognitive, organic, perceptive, linguistic, written. Every aspect of Being is now a battlefield, an infinite battlefield that goes far beyond the limits of the World.

What is happening here on Earth, he muses later in the day as he walks toward Link's hangar, is the pivotal structure of an event involving the whole Cosmos.

A few meters farther on, as the hangar comes into view, an incandescent burst of intuition illuminates his mind: *And it is because it was on this particular Earth that this particular humanity was created.*

Yuri waits for night to fall before he confides in Chrysler. The night has always been their greatest ally—perhaps their only one. The night is when secrets are shared. The night is when betrayals happen. The night is when the invisible can be made visible.

The hours spent that afternoon in Link's hangar were enough to make it clear that they have reached critical mass. Total war with no possibility of mercy. Conduction at the subatomic level. Conduction at the level of infinity. Everything dead is alive; everything they believe to be alive bears death; the future of man lies in a secret fold of the past; the future represented by neohumanity is a simulated temporality where the present is indefinitely looped back upon itself.

Between the Thing—probably singularized in an organic simulation of a human being—and Link de Nova—more-than-human born of a singular ontic narration, created by a woman become an angel and a cyborg killer become a man, a strange relationship is polarizing on the axis of tyranny and mutation.

For the Thing, the devolving mutation permits it to extend the collective tyranny of Humanity over itself in absolute determinism. For Link, the tyranny exercised by the mind over Electricity and Machines permits it to

glimpse Light as the moment when any mutation “signals” individuality in its infinite freedom, its *determining* freedom.

Yuri knows his friend has been waiting from the beginning for the conversation, when he will say what he has to say. When they will discuss the secret that Campbell can only discern in general terms—as a “presence”—and that Yuri can neither hide nor fully understand. Now comes the instant of primordial ignition. The act. The story in action.

“I spoke to Link today.”

“Right; we went to see him this morning, remember?”

“I went back to see him alone—not for any particular reason; we’ve been doing it for some time.”

Chrysler does not answer; this is a revelation: Link and Yuri are developing a unique relationship, one unlike any other. He tells himself that it is a sort of translation of his own relationship with the young Yuri a dozen years ago. A brotherhood. There are eleven years’ difference in age between each of the three of them. Chance is truly a god for Sunday’s engineer. Campbell waits patiently for Yuri’s tongue to unfreeze, for the words to come from the man he considers his younger brother.

“Listen. Link has a project. I think he concocted it with Judith Sevigny. It fits in with the rest; the station connected to the Ring, the Territory Radio, the Neomachine ...”

“Judith Sevigny? Are you sure?”

“Link told me so.”

“What project?”

“You won’t believe it. Really.”

“Is there anything left in the Territory I wouldn’t believe? Don’t treat me like an innocent, Yuri, no matter how much progress you make.”

“Okay. They want to build an ark.”

“An ark?!”

“Yes, a space ark to take the communities of HNV to the Ring.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Yuri, how exactly are they planning to do this?”

Yuri doesn’t answer. He gazes at the little biophosphorescent lamp shining in Campbell’s section of the cabin; for his part, an old LED diode screen serves as a night lamp near his own bed. They are talking from their respective segments of the cabin through the metallic half-opening the Ford

Travelaire creates between them. Yuri looks often out the airplane window next to his bed. The airplane debris is hardly distinguishable from the landscape overtaken by vast expanses of neodesert plunged in darkness. The whole world is becoming a giant bunker. The whole world will soon resemble terrain devastated by a sort of indefinitely renewed microcatastrophe. A world in which any real accident will be impossible.

Campbell, for his part, seems to be deep in thought. "Yuri, how does Link think he's going to build—and then launch—a space vessel into orbit from ..."

He cuts himself off.

There he goes, thinks Yuri. The human computer has just found the correct algorithm; he has just put the right data in the right banks.

Yuri wonders for a moment if he can allow himself the indulgence of leaving even the tiniest possibility of doubt.

But this world has no more room for doubt. What they must detonate now are the blinding grenades of truth.

"They're going to use the twelve rockets left at the cosmodrome. Link's going to restore everything to working order. Absolutely everything. The rockets, the orbiters, the launch center, the platforms. Everything."

"Goddamn," spits Campbell, a bit dazzled nonetheless. "An ark, you said?"

"Yes, like Noah's Ark. But much more modest, of course."

"If they succeed, each orbiter stored in the cosmodrome can hold six passengers. Multiply that by twelve and you get seventy-two. There will still be more than twelve thousand people left in HNV County. 'Modest.' I like your adjectives."

"Okay, but it isn't really any more daft than waiting for the Thing to kill us all, one after the other, in one way or another. Even if the Neo-machine works, it is still in the first phase of its activity. Link wants to stay one step ahead of the Thing. Because, as you know, it is endlessly adapting—that seems to be one of its favorite pastimes. When I was leaving, he said to me that this is only the initial phase. He said it's nothing compared to what he has in mind next."

Chrysler does not answer.

When Link de Nova has an idea in his head, it can take form in reality at any moment. Link de Nova foresaw the arrival of the last entity. He has decided to take on its successors. He has decided that the best way to fight

against a world that has come to take the place of another world is to abandon it like a picked-over carcass.

He has made up his mind that the cosmodrome will function again, one last time.

42 > *LOVE AND ROCKETS*

The rumors spread through the Territory as rapidly as an outbreak of the Black Death.

The men of HMTV have placed a sort of machine—a beacon, an antenna; it is difficult to pinpoint an exact designation—near one of the groups of windmills on Xenon Ridge. The sheriff's patrols have completely secured the cosmodrome as well as the whole part of the strip located near North Junction Road. It looks like a zone under siege, according to one of Belfond's informers; he is quick to pass this information along to Jade Silverskin. The latter only remarks: "This has something to do with the spontaneous remissions." Then he asks: "Where are we with Deadlink?"

"Cybion I is going to name one Laura Descarville as bishop of the township; we already have an initial group of two or three hundred followers there."

"The men of HMTV and their fucking machine are moving faster than us," says Silverskin.

It is the first time the humans have pulled ahead of the Anome. He guesses that it must be part of a plan.

The problem is knowing who the idea man, the executor, is—the HMTV Machine, or the Anome itself?

Which of the two is trapping the other? Which of the two is pulling off a master ruse?

Which of the two will win?

For Link de Nova, the solution to the problems posed by the double polarities at play in the relationships among tyranny, mutation, politics, theology, and the two humanities that articulate them in their irreconcilable ways obviously do not come from rational reflection anchored in reading, or even in the study of outside phenomena.

As usual, the answer comes to him as he is deeply asleep. It is like an explosion, so bright that he wakes abruptly though dawn is hours away and

all of HNV is plunged in night blackness.

His Neomachine was created to fight the Thing on the plan of individuation; it immunizes both the biological and the mechanical, and thus protects the symbolic of their disjunction. He knows the machine will be of great use in the launch of his space program, his plan to reconquer the High Frontier.

But it is totally powerless against the attack happening now, the attack against writing, against books, against libraries. Against *the* Library.

He remembers his first instinct when he realized how to fight the devolution of human language. *It is not through the organic and language itself that it must happen, but rather through the mechanical.* Hence his solving of the problem via electric music.

How to build the network of correspondences in the face of this antiscryptural attack? What is the device? Should they rewrite the threatened texts?

The work of medieval copying against the destructive power of a Metamachine inverted and integrated into humanity ...no, that wouldn't work. That is not the answer.

The solution is still lost in the haze of sleep. The flash woke him, but it faded away the moment he opened his eyes. The main problem with consciousness is that it requires constant effort.

The manuscript.

The story his father has been trying to write for so long.

They will fight the devolution of Logos with the Voice, the Word in action—and thus with Music, the electric Song. They will fight the annihilation of writing with the rebirth of writing. It is the only “place” where the interface can split. Because a book is always active, because it is what etches mind onto matter, it is what individuates language in itself, what *signs* singularity and unity of sense and form.

“You have to start work on your novel again, Father. It's the only way to save all your books. Your fiction will be an action. It will protect the scriptural reality of the Library.”

Milan Djordjevic cannot find the words to answer. *He has*, thinks Link de Nova, *immediately understood what I mean.*

The narration of the origins and of the final end against the disinscription of the future and of memory.

You have found your place, dear Father, he thinks. Now you know your role and your importance in this war.

He knows his father lost his first wife and a daughter in the last “historic” war in southern Europe, twelve years ago.

You’re ready for Armageddon, Father, he cannot stop himself from thinking. You always have been.

Transluminic. That is the best word to describe the “substance” of the antenna, as they say of transfinite numbers. It is connected to active infinity; it is much more powerful than the numeric devolution based on the Aristotelian precepts of *indefiniteness*.

In it, all speeds beyond that of light are so many infinities incorporating endlessly, merging, dividing, and reincorporating again.

It is the Antenna of cognitive Light; it is the Antenna of the Halo. The Halo that will serve as an active diagram among all lights.

It will be beautiful. It will be immense. It will be tomorrow.

Yuri and Campbell stand in the doorway of the now-deserted hangar. They have come on behalf of the sheriff, who must submit to the Council the motion permitting them to select the seventy-two chosen people who will leave for the Ring.

“Just tell the sheriff that I’m going to start restoring everything to working order tomorrow. It won’t take much more than twenty-four hours. Then we can proceed with the launches.”

“The sheriff would like to remind you that only a dozen residents of HMTV, not including the two androids, have ever experienced a space flight.”

“That doesn’t matter; the cosmodrome orbiters are totally automated. And if twelve of your volunteers are already experienced space travelers, all you have to do is put one of them in each shuttle as mission chief. As for the ‘chosen’ people, tell the sheriff there won’t be any; they will just be pioneers, because after the cosmodrome launches I have a plan to put the whole community of HMTV in orbit.”

“Link?! What are you talking about?” gasps Campbell.

“Let me be. Let’s worry about the conventional launches first.”

“Conventional?” asks Yuri.

“The propulsion rockets at the cosmodrome.”

“Yes, I know, but—do you mean that the rest of your plan isn’t based on conventional space technology?”

The light-haloed boy bursts into laughter. His hangar is empty, all traces gone of his many machines, which are now assembled into the single “object” above Xenon Ridge. There is only sun and sky, whose beauty persists.

“Nothing you’ve seen before now will be anything like what you’ll see on that day,” answers Link de Nova, simply.

It is a conclusion like a plane crashing somewhere on the prairie. It is a conclusion like a fireball shooting toward the stars.

It is beautiful. It is immense. And now it is today.

It is early morning in the Territory. The cosmodrome is lit with a thousand lights scattered like sodium petals at the tops of the tall pylons surrounding the launch platforms. The launch center is ablaze with light. The hangars are ablaze with light. The huge crawlers carrying the launchers to the ramps are ablaze with light.

The Antenna on Xenon Ridge alone is as magnificently brilliant as a star.

Not far away, a young boy with a Gibson electric guitar runs his fingers up and down the neck of the instrument. The boy is surrounded with a halo of light; the guitar is incorporated into that halo, and so is the Machine. All three of them—the boy, the guitar, and the antenna—are in the midst of reawakening a vanished civilization; all three of them—the non-born human, the electric instrument, and the Machine of light—are in the midst of *causing future humanity to be reborn*.

Indeed, the three of them are really only one.

And the rockets are twelve brilliant warheads with their noses pointed toward the alabaster sky, where a few ghostly stars can be seen in the faint blueness.

They are the twelve ardent arrows that will pave the way for multitudes, thinks Link.

They are our first real war machines, thinks Yuri.

There aren’t enough of them, thinks Campbell.

They are going to get us out of the Camp-World dominated by the Thing, think the seventy-two occupants of the automated orbiters.

They are all of this at once.

Above all, at the moment they are tall silver pipes emitting thick greenish clouds of liquid oxygen and hydrogen.

In the launch center, lights leap from one screen to another; all the computers are working; huge maps of the sky are holographically projected on the four corners of the control room; images of the rockets in place on their platforms or en route on their crawlers can be seen on the wall screens. But the huge building is empty, empty of all human presence, as if the ghosts of the operators who worked there forty years ago have secretly come back to work.

At the top of Xenon Ridge, the Antenna has never glowed more brightly; the guitar has never been more supersonic; the boy has never played such riffs, such series of world-explosions.

Yuri understands the secret that the diagram of the boy-guitar-Neo-machine is drawing: beneath appearances, beneath the world of the total simulacrum that has been put in place like a materialized form of the Nothingness, we are all Antennas. We are all sensors of intensity, of image, of affect, of plan; we are all sensor emitters of ontic energy, of superphysical tensors. Light is the operative becoming of matter. Its photonic future, its cosmogonic future. Its absolutely unitary dimension suggests the incredible possibility of a luminous future for Humanity itself, like the critical and actual convergence of potentialities that are yet impossible.

It is what forms the ultimate diagrammatical plan of the Real World. It is the atemporal Future of all cognition.

It is the future of light; it is the fundamental ontology of the machine. It is the sole power that can stop the progression of the Great Devolution.

This Light is what, itself uncreated, permits Creation to hold itself within the processive relationship between unity, form, meaning, and difference.

This Light is us.

Now, one by one, a few minutes apart, the engines begin to hum.

This is Reality, thinks Yuri. This is the act. This is the event.

In the real universe, neither “subjects” nor “objects” have any concrete existence—because reality is what fills the created world with events and actualizations of differentials, with a unitary and metamorphic multiplex of pure intensities, with processes in constant variation; in the real world, only varying and photonic entities remain. Quantum forces. On the other side of this, the universalization of the Simulacrum, the hyperfalse World, this

“intrigue” insinuating itself into the Created World, endlessly offers its fundamental schism between subject and object, which permits it to establish its domination, through the terminal setup of a global system of representations whose goal is to reduce chronological singularities in binary series of numbers and invariants. So the Technical World imposes its relinquishment in order to cause individuals to devolve into “human material.” This trend, Yuri knows, has been happening since the beginning of the previous century, the terrible twentieth century, but the wave reached its peak with the arrival of the Metastructure; then, after the paradoxical disappearance of that, *it became the wave*, and it brought about a global tsunami. A technoplanetary device, but without Technology, without World, without Language.

The real world is the world of Link de Nova. At this moment the real world is here, condensed in the illuminated cosmodrome. The Real World, this Future-Light of matter, is the warped conspiracy against the conspiracy; it is the conspiracy of Beauty against posthumanity.

The platforms enveloped in thick gray smoke; the red-orange flare of oxyhydric fire pouring from the bottoms of the rockets; the burning lava ejected at thousands of kilometers per hour. Then the ascension, slow at first and then faster and faster, and the points of fire and metal disappearing into the high atmosphere. It is so beautiful, this ultimate eruption of the Created World.

Yuri watches Judith out of the corner of his eye. Her family was not chosen, just like all the other members of the Council. The sheriff proved intractable on this point, as usual: “The captain and his officers leave last. That has been the Law for hundreds of years, maybe more, and I’m certainly not going to be the one to change it.”

Not only will the sheriff not change the Law but, without a doubt, he will uphold it with all his strength. However, he has authorized the entire Jewish community, including Rabbi Apelbaum, to depart aboard one of the twelve orbiters.

Yuri knows the sheriff is reluctant to break up the county’s communities, its families, its rare institutions—but it would have been absurd to keep the rabbi here, simply as a member of the Council, while sending the other eleven Jews to safety in the Ring. The sheriff will preserve the county’s

diverse humanity, but above all he will maintain its *unity*. In the face of the Law of Bronze, decisions must always be made with the care of one trying to defuse a bomb.

Wilbur Langlois has given priority to families with small children and to a few monastic groups that have existed for years in Humvee and its environs. The seventy-two places filled up very fast indeed.

Yuri looks at Judith, masking his feelings as best he can.

The magnificence of the rockets haloed with light just before takeoff; this same light stretching infinitely between Link, his guitar, and the Antenna. The magnificence of emotion at the rising thrum of the engines; the magnificence of the sky into which the rockets are disappearing. The magnificence of this day. The magnificence of Judith.

He realizes, stunned, just how deeply he is in love with this girl. He would have tied himself to one of the orbiters to follow her into space if she had been among those chosen to go.

Everything changes, all at once. Absolutely everything.

And everything is still changing, at every second. At each second the process is amplified.

Nothing can stop its dazzling progression. No. It is infinite.

Paralyzed by his discovery, Yuri realizes that love in itself is the infiniteness of all infinities permitting the final phase of any individuation. Without Divine Love there can be no men, but since we are all made in His image we each hold a spark of Logos, and our true singularity can only exist in the truly unique relationship, the one called love, that we establish with another singularity, and that that singularity establishes with us.

The Thing is not based only on the eternal “lack” of false numeric infinity; it cannot escape this impassable limitation that is its principal “ontological lack”: it is, to all appearances, completely deprived of love.

Beauty is alive because it is mortal. It achieves eternity through “death.” Love is made thus; it is what always dies, but never surrenders.

That explains the fundamental ontological impossibility of the devolving Mutation of Humanity. It is planning to become, in one way or another, a sort of organic ecology complementary to the neoecology of *icesand* that is engulfing the globe. Yuri feels it; what is happening now, what has been happening since the First Fall, is only a kind of selective stage. He

envisions it; the postmechanical neohumanity will be postlinguistic as well, and one wonders if it will even be truly biological.

It is like a multicephalous *zoon*, a single organism in which all the heads are interfaced in a network to form a collective, global, planetary megabrain. The Metastructure without the Metastructure. No more need of it. Humanity-turned entropic mechanism creates its own devolutions. And it will reign as such, with no machines, no language, no more biological singularities.

Judith Sevigny is so beautiful. The neoworld would be so ugly. Judith Sevigny is mortal. The neoworld would be immortal.

The certainty is anchored in him like an injection with no possible remission.

The rockets take off one after the other, a few minutes apart. They are surrounded by the light shining who-knows-how from the Antenna; then the engines kick in and the vertical push begins. Beauty is on their side; all the machines restored to action promise no backward turn toward the mechanical age. Their technology is infinite; it is cognitive Light, thinks Yuri. Soon the neoecology will cover the whole Earth. The cosmodrome is a surviving oasis—for now, at least. It is the last cosmodrome battling the last World.

Judith is to humanity what these luminous rockets are to this world. She is everything anyone could want, everything anyone could need, everything anyone could dare to desire; she is what turns need into obsession; she is everything that seems unattainable, even as it nestles deeper and deeper within you. Judith, strangely, is two thousand light-years away from him, like a distant star, and yet she is planted forever at the center of his being. This paradox raises a painful question: When will we be able to create the right amount of distance between us? When will we be able to touch each other—our skin, our flesh, our nerves? When will I have the nerve to speak? When will I have the nerve to act? When will I dare to take the greatest risk of my entire life?

The sheriff's men and the members of the Council have taken up strategic positions in the launch center, from where they can follow the progress of the transatmospheric and then orbital flight of the twelve capsules. The rockets will link flawlessly to the cluster from which the two Ring astronauts came.

The Mission has been accomplished. Seventy-two men have rejoined the Orbital Ring.

The cosmodrome is alive again. Beauty still has a chance, Yuri thinks. And Beauty is giving him a chance in return.

Judith is at his side, a few meters away at most, two thousand light-years at least, but it is as if the halo of light has engulfed the two of them. The last rocket disappears slowly in the pale blue zenith. Judith's gaze follows it, an almost-ecstatic expression on her face. Yuri cannot take his eyes from her profile, lit by the sharp light of dawn, and he takes advantage of the slight movements of her head to register every detail of her features: the stray black curl of hair touching her lips, the crystalline turquoise glitter of her royal-blue eyes, the ivory whiteness of her skin, the occasional rise of her breasts under her sweater as she breathes. The slightest detail singularizes her, he thinks, as if to overcome emotion with reason—or perhaps it is simply the reflex of a man of the Territory. He remembers the words of Duns Scotus: *“Everything, in man, is individuated.”* Beauty rises up when its emergence matches that of the world allowing it to exist, he thinks, creating an event that is the singularity of singularities.

Beauty—unique, true, unmatched—is an infinitely active condensation of love.

They have succeeded. Link just launched the very last space program on the planet of men. For two full hours, Beauty illuminated the Earth with its light and the stars with its fire. For two full hours, the cosmodrome spurred the beauty of the last machines toward the sky, where they can live in freedom in the service of men.

The whole Territory must be aware of it, thinks Yuri.

Especially the men who have tried to trap them several times, the men who are taking possession of minds and bodies little by little, working out of Junkville. The men who, they say, are working for the Thing, and who have been immunized in return. The men who are, without a possible doubt, their mortal enemies.

The Law of the Territory: it is at the moment that safety seems surest that you are in the greatest danger.

The Law of the Territory: it is at the moment of greatest danger that the opportunity for victory presents itself.

The Law of the Territory: *if your attack is going very well, it's an ambush.*

43 > *LADYTRON*

Yuri watches Sydia Nova, Link's mother, walk toward the wall that rises north of the city. He can't say why he follows her, but he does, at a distance. One of the last androids still alive on Earth, with the two astronauts from the Ring and the one Link calls the "Anomist," the artificial creature gathering the people of the Territory around his own healing power. The short northern spring will soon melt directly into summer; temperatures will become suffocatingly hot, and new climatic phenomena will surely arise. New storms. The continuance of the neoecological invasion—maybe even new forms of it. The Devolving Mutation has more than one trick up its sleeve; its production process is based on a sort of absolute fixity interpolated with continual change, annihilating all possibility of real transformation as well as any foundation for anything. The Thing lives on this kind of hybridization; it is its active principle: causing every entity to destroy itself by mingling it with its opposing principle. Absolute conservation of absolute destruction. The word *museum*, the word *cemetery*, the word *necropolis*—none of them do justice to the strength of the Thing. Absolute thanatic power. It already dominates the Camp-World, to which it is promising eternity.

The sun is a sphere of pure gold above Heavy Metal Valley; the sky is ocean blue. The world is full of Beauty even as it disappears.

Link's mother follows the recently reinforced high steel walls; crossing paths with a few sheriff's deputies preparing to patrol the northern limits of the county, she exchanges a few words with them.

Heavy Metal Valley sparkles like an immense lake of metal, glittering so brightly that it seems as if it could light up all the nights in the world.

Yuri has one of his insights, one of the flashes that comes sometimes to electrify his thoughts.

Of everyone in HMV, Link's mother is the person most familiar with the mysteries of her son's origins, the Hotel Laika, and even the end of the

Metastructure. Nothing that happens in the Territory surprises her. Her true role is buried deep inside herself; it is possible that she is unaware of it; it is possible that she can do nothing; it is certain that she is both the initial point and the destinal line of Link de Nova—and so of us all.

Madam android, Madam the artificial lady, Madam Territory, Madam the mother of the boy in the halo, Madam manufactured in space and enclosed, like all of them, in the Camp-World.

Madam the supermachine that had herself baptized on this Earth.

She is the true secret of HMTV. And now hardly anyone ever leaves HMTV, and absolutely no one enters it. Her son may be the one controlling the invisible barrier surrounding the county, but she is the heart of the sanctuary.

The Fortress will remain closed. The Fortress is preparing to become a counterworld. The Fortress is extending the shadow of justice, of the Law, all across the Territory. The sheriff has totally militarized the organization of his patrols and the two hundred fifty members of the county's civil defense force. He has closed all the entries to the cosmodrome except for Apollo Drive, and he has prohibited all road traffic on the northern part of the circular boulevard. He has done the same on the Monolith Hills strip, blocking off the whole area near the Hotel Laika. The invisible magnetic line that Link de Nova's Ark has traced around the valley is now reinforced by a concrete barrier. Armored trucks. Barbed wire intertwining with what remains of the local flora. Minefields. Armed men. *Use of deadly weapons authorized.*

Wilbur Langlois has created a Territory-within-the-Territory. He has initiated an open secession. He has erected a security wall between Heavy Metal Valley and the other communities. He has marked a border. He has burned bridges and sunk ships.

It is a gesture of great hostility, yet one devoid of any ostensible aggressiveness—a little like pressing the rifle of a barrel gently against the forehead of a man who has just fallen into your hands.

Wilbur Langlois has created a Territory-within-the-Territory. The Law of Bronze will be even more intense here.

* * *

Link de Nova's mother looks him deeply in the eyes, ignoring the golden halo that surrounds him.

She doesn't even seem surprised at my transformation, he often thinks. It is as if the whole thing is completely natural to her. As if it is a natural consequence of my birth. But he never asks her any questions on the subject.

"He knows where we are now."

"I know, Mother. But we also know where he is."

"That doesn't matter in the least to us, but it is of great importance to him."

Link thinks of the phrase Yuri and Campbell are constantly repeating: *Every relationship in the Territory is inevitably asymmetrical. If it weren't, there would be no more Law.*

"Chrysler Campbell told me the android has appointed himself 'Pope' of some sort of church, and that he has converted hundreds and hundreds of humans in the Territory. Apparently he has the ability to provide some kind of chemotherapy, a medicine his body produces that immunizes people."

"Your Antenna immunizes them, too, and on a much larger scale now."

"Yes, but they don't know it. The android's followers, on the other hand, are perfectly aware of the operation as it is happening."

"How was an android able to become the Thing?"

"He isn't the Thing, Mother; he is the only 'place,' slightly but not fully organic, in which It can interface with humanity. He allows it to simulate individuation, and in exchange an organic component of his body provides people with immunity. It's very well thought-out. Don't forget that the Thing is an inverted mutation of all species."

"This android isn't a member of any species."

"Exactly, Mother; that's what allows him to be a vector for this new human speciation. He's like me in that way. We are identical and totally opposite at the same time."

"He doesn't come from the Nothingness; it is the Nothingness that comes from him. Think about the nature of the immortality he's offering to neohumans: they will conquer the World and dominate the Earth, but they will lose the heavens—in both senses of the word."

"I know, Mother. You have to understand the nature of the Halo. It surrounds me—but not as an external energy source; I'm the one that emits it and captures it. I am an antenna myself, Mother. And the Halo is just the

visible manifestation of an ‘ecstasy’ of matter. This Light is cognitive. It is the perceptible form of a *transfinite electricity* that travels at a speed *infinitely* faster than that of light. To fight the devolutionary posthuman of the Post-Technical world, we have to reinvent a true science of man, perceived as a bioundulation of nature.”

“Do you think you can defeat the Anome with the help of this energy?”

“It is its ontological enemy, Mother. Matter/antimatter, Light/anti-light.”

“That means that even if your energy is victorious, the world will be destroyed anyway.”

“No, Mother. It means that the world has already been destroyed, and that the Halo is the only force capable of restoring it.”

Yuri is standing beside Campbell, facing Djordjevic and Zarkovsky. The war between the Antenna, the Ark, the Neomachine—whatever its name—and what men in the Territory have recently begun calling the Anome will be a true war of the worlds. It will be a war of ward, the Supreme Mother of all battles. Yuri knows the hour of Armageddon has come. The alarm is resonating from one side of the planet to the other. He knows there will be no quarter on either side. He knows that the disappearance of the Library would mean the end of their world, the end of their war, the end of their freedom.

It is the last library.

Campbell looks at the shelves, crammed with books of all kinds. The windows of the large deluxe trailer have been painted with gray anti-UV coating to ensure the protection of the books against the deleterious effects of sunlight on cellulose. The inside of the vehicle is filled with dim bluish light, slightly silvery, lunar. It is beautiful, very beautiful. And very fragile. The cellulose is protected from UV rays, but printed ink has fallen into the hands of the Devolution.

“A county of two thousand five hundred men; one sheriff; more than twelve thousand books. And on the other side an entire ecology, a World, just as we warned you. Not to mention a desert as big as a continent.”

“David against Goliath. A very old story, my boy.”

“A story that was valid at a time when history still existed, Professor. Now it isn’t David against Goliath, it is Humanity against the Flood. Except

that the Flood is both mineral and symbolic, and it is part of Humanity itself. It is everything—everything except what we expected.”

“That’s because we still don’t know how to read the Scriptures after two thousand years—twice that, if you add the Old Testament,” says Djordjevic.

Campbell does not answer. He is silent and a bit pale. Yuri has noticed his companion’s unusual attitude; their gazes meet for an instant, as they usually do when a piece of heavenly certainty breaks free and falls at their feet.

Yes, thinks Yuri, knowing that Chrysler is thinking the same thing. It’s becoming more and more certain. A secret force is pushing us to adopt the HMY lifestyle—and it is no attempt at social adaptation. It comes from somewhere else, from somewhere deep inside us, from what we are becoming.

We are going to have to have ourselves baptized in our turn.

We are going to become Christians.

If he had said to himself, *We are going to become extraterrestrials*, the stupefaction born of complete and obvious necessity would not have been any less intense.

But before he can talk to them about it, he must make sure that the Territory-within-the-Territory will be the Fortress they need. They will have to play their role as men of the Territory to the hilt. They will have to let the Law of Bronze become more luminous than the sun. Better to let Professor Zarkovsky and Milan Djordjevic speak. Let them speak so that it will be easier, when the time comes, to impose silence on them.

The Professor begins:

“No biotech firm specializing in the manufacture of androids has ever been able to pierce the mystery of the individuation of their machines, which are no longer machines. They are certainly creatures of the Creature, but they are not simple inanimate objects. They are living, autonomous, free beings—which gives rise to thriving conflicts with radical groups like Flandro. ...”

“Individuation would never happen unless it was programmed as such,” continues Djordjevic. “It is not a simulation generated by lines of code. This was fully realized with the fourth-generation androids, but the symptoms were detected in some third-generation androids before that.

Individuation is not programmable because it is more than a program; it is a *plan of singularity*, and this ‘plan’ autoinitiates in a general bootstrap that comes from a process lasting from *in pseudo-utero* conception to birth, and then from birth to death, and which encompasses the simplest sequences of the genetic code as well as the most complex neural configurations. Individuation as a principle is not explicable solely according to the laws of biocellular chemistry or neurocybernetics. It was irritating for the companies’ bionicians, but was viewed favorably by the same firms’ financiers—it meant just that many fewer dollars spent on research and development.”

Zarkovsky takes up the thread again. “But the fact that individuation is not explicable solely by the laws of biochemistry does not mean that other scientific areas of study can’t be used to allow us, at the very least, to glimpse the truth. What no one understood at the time—obviously, there was no Duns Scotus teaching at MIT—was that the principle of individuation has little to do with anything ‘biological.’ It was cosmogenesis, non-Euclidean and non-Aristotelian mathematics, generative linguistics, and quantum physics that were of most use to us. And it is also what the Library showed us—Djordjevic and me—before the Fall. We guessed that the problem posed by the ‘spontaneous’ individuation of the fourth-generation androids and that raised by the final form of the Metastructure were connected. Then, after the Fall, we both understood—separately—that this problem applied even more to the Post-Machine entity.”

“And now that the Post-Machine is changing into a new entity, our only chance is to be brought together, all of us, here, with the Library.”

Campbell lets a few seconds tick by—the time necessary for a sniper to hold his breath before firing the fatal shot. “You don’t understand, I’m afraid.”

“What don’t we understand?”

“The essential thing. Your Library will be gone in a few months. Even Link’s cosmomagnetic Antenna can’t stop this mutation, which is attacking neither humans nor even androids nor language, but their written productions.”

“What do you suggest?”

“It’s neither my place nor Yuri’s to make suggestions, Mr. Djordjevic, but we know that your son came to see you to explain his idea to you, and we

think he's right, as always."

"A dozen books have already been completely erased; another twenty are beginning to devolve—including some Bibles from the Vatican. Nothing seems able to resist this mutation, not even the Holy Scriptures. My son's strategy is the right one, I know, but I'm afraid we don't have enough time."

"Your son is the one who can get you the time and help you need. I'm afraid for us it's the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"Yes. For once we need others to help us. In this particular case, we have no other choice."

"What are you talking about?"

"A baptism," replies Campbell. "Two, in fact. Immediately, if possible."

Djordjevic looks at Campbell and Yuri in turn. Territory men. Young killers. Young killers who fought for the Library, who are fighting for life, and who will fight to the death to save his son, Link de Nova.

"Your problems are just beginning, young men. I'll go find Father Newman," he answers, simply.

Welcome to the Territory

Welcome to the stealth bomber of the invisible truth

Welcome to the Territory

You will enter the sanctuary of the most dangerous truce.

Our problems began at birth, thinks Yuri. They are the Territory; they are what we are.

They are what has permitted us to survive and resist until now. They are what has led us to make this request. They are what is still leading us to take the greatest risk.

They are the only freedom we have left.

44 > *THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL*

Since the previous night, the sky has been an immense silvery dome embracing the whole Territory with its aerial shield. Clouds have come from all directions; they are accumulating with the unpredictable patience of the elements above the last men, their homes, their crimes, their hopes.

“Twelve rockets. Twelve rockets in two hours. Even in the era of the Metastructure that never happened, Master Cybion.”

“Smoke and mirrors, Mr. Silverskin, I assure you. They restored the cosmodrome to working order—well and good—but I promise it will make no difference in the end. They have a launchpad, yes, but nothing left to launch.”

“What it really means is that their fucking machine is operating at 100 percent. That it is capable of repairing sophisticated technology—not to mention the spontaneous remissions it is causing by the thousands.”

“We are causing healings, too. The difference is that members of the church are guaranteed immortality. That’s a bonus that will skyrocket in value very fast.”

“I have very trustworthy informants who tell me the remissions caused by the machine go far beyond the Territory. Belfond met a guy from West Virginia who told him about whole series of true miracles.”

Cybion I smiles.

“Silverskin, the only true miracle is the one the Anome can bestow on humanity. As for the remissions their machine is causing, you should think about how much that will serve our interests.”

“How?”

“The simple law of competition. The necro Triads are beginning to hurt for work in the Territory. Add it up: Our evangelists are distributing hundreds of the Anome’s capsules every day now. People are making the connection fast. When the ones healed by their machine realize that ours have also been healed, *plus* given the gift of immortality, *and* that they are

part of a global community of permanent recycling, they will come to us. Not dying is good. *Never* dying is even better.”

Silverskin watches the purple crow circling his mobile home. For some time now the bird has been living on one of the pylons atop the butte. Silverskin has gotten used to its presence. The bird comes and goes regularly between Junkville and the northern parts of the Territory. Silverskin wonders for an instant if it ever flies to Heavy Metal Valley, if it has gotten close to the luminous machine, if it is aware of the militarization of the county’s border by the sheriff—more than two hundred heavily armed men, according to Belfond—and if it has glimpsed any special relationship between the boy with extraordinary powers and the emergence of this unknown technology. If it has seen the Professor. If it has detected the presence of two or three androids.

Cybion I, however, is preoccupied with things much closer to the ground.

“You’ve got to tell Belfond that he absolutely has to get inside their fucking county.”

“Belfond is our best man, Master. If he tells me no one can get in, that means an entire army couldn’t do it.”

“I need confirmation.”

“Confirmation of what?”

“There is a strange quantum correlation happening between me and the other androids, a divergence I can’t understand. And I detest unanswered questions. Especially when they have to do with artificial humans.”

Silverskin knows that Cybion I has no desire whatsoever for the destruction of humanity; he simply wants it to be “interfaced,” for its own good, with the Anome.

On the other hand, he does intend the definitive extermination of the last androids of his own species, however many of them might be left.

We always hate those most similar to us. It is one of the oldest human laws, and it is apparently shared by artificial men.

“What has you so worried, Master?”

“I am detecting a very powerful intensity differential in this correlation. It functions almost normally with two of the androids, the ones I’ve identified as coming from the Orbital Ring.”

“From the Ring? Are you sure?”

“Absolutely sure, though I still can’t explain it. But they aren’t the ones causing the problem—it’s the third one. I can’t identify it; I don’t know if it

is a male, female, or androgynous model. It's still very difficult for me to locate. It sometimes disappears from my field of perception, and when I can find it, it is only a vague silhouette, nothing concrete, no usable information. I want to know what's going on."

"You don't know the sheriff's men. Belfond will never be able to get in. We might as well send him directly to Lake Champlain to drown himself."

"I have to know, Silverskin. Don't forget that the last mutation, the alphanumeric devolution, is double-edged; it also destroys everything that is written. And androids are designed and built with lines of code."

"I know all of that very well, Master; that is why all artificial humans will die, in the Name of the universal Anome."

"That is how they are *intended* to die. But there is a sort of obstacle blocking the mutation, blocking it from individuating in them—especially the third one, the unidentified one. I can sense perfectly well that the antiscriptural attack is having no effect on that one."

"It's their fucking magnetic machine, Master Cybion. Until we destroy it, there's nothing we can do—especially including getting into HNV."

When Cybion I smiles, it is as if he is exhaling an invisible toxic cloud.

"I don't think Belfond can learn anything there. Is it worth it to risk the life of one of our best men when we don't even know what we're looking for? Don't forget that I sent him and his whole team to help the bishop of Grand Funk Railroad put down a rebellion there. That seems much more important to me—begging your pardon, Master."

"Rebellions are easily quashed. They're only men. I will have to destroy the last androids on Earth myself, and this entity is preventing me from doing it."

"What entity? Their machine?"

"No, that's what I don't understand. It doesn't seem related at all. There is a mystery here, and no mystery can be impenetrable for the Anome. In the world of the Anome everything will be transparent. Secrecy will be prohibited; all mysteries will be forbidden. I cannot really begin my work for the Anome as long as this caliber of secret exists in the Territory."

"The Territory is made of secrets. And of secrets betrayed. It's the Law, as they say."

"The Territory is the beginning of our world. Utopia. I am the Law of the Territory now, Silverskin. There is no other."

There is no possible reply to this; power is nothing but a lie creating the truth. That is the Law, too. Even the purple crow now soaring toward the northwest would probably agree.

Besides, it's true.

Link watches the winged silhouette of the large Territory crow whirl above Bulldozer Park for a few moments before settling atop the vertical exhaust pipe of a very old Kenworth truck. The bird is a creature of habit.

It comes here more and more often these days. It always comes from the south. It is the only living being able to cross the border into the Fortress. It is the only living being able to enter and leave the Territory-within-the-Territory at will.

"It isn't only attacking the Library, Gabriel."

"I know, Mother. *Everything* written."

"Including the bionic programs that serve as DNA pseudocodes for us, you realize?"

The Anome digitalizes the language of living beings and unwrites thought stored in dead memory. Link stares at his mother, feeling a stab of fear. "Are you feeling its effects, Mother?"

Sydia Nova smiles uneasily. "No; not me, Gabriel, but I can see it in the others, in their biological clocks."

"The others? You mean the astronauts?"

"Yes. One of them doesn't know it yet, but billions of lines of code will have been erased in a few hours. It's more random for the other one, happening in pieces."

"You say they don't know about it yet—how can you know it, then?"

"I can also read the clock of the other one—the one outside, the one who wants to destroy us."

"And you read that he is preparing to destroy the two androids from the Ring?"

"No," answers his mother. "He isn't preparing to do it; he has already begun doing it."

Link realizes that nothing can change the situation; it is too late, even for them to return to orbit. The androids will die. They don't know it. His mother does.

She must know when, down to the very minute.

She knows what no one has the right to know.

Except here, in the Territory.

The Territory, which knows the worst there is. The Territory, which keeps Beauty intact in the face of abomination, and abomination intact in the face of Beauty. The Territory, where secrets grow like weeds. The Territory, where weeds hide the most terrible, most undisclosable secrets.

Welcome to the Territory

Yes, I am the camouflage world that hides the man who lives in its core

Welcome to the Territory

Do not believe in reality look at me, can't you see it's not me anymore?

Yuri looks at Link de Nova, an unreadable expression on his face, an expression even he would not have recognized in a mirror.

“Father Newman is baptizing us tomorrow. Chrysler and me.”

“I know; my mother told me. Welcome to the Kingdom, Yuri.”

“*Welcome to the Territory ... I know.*”

Yuri's voice is slightly veiled by an emotion Link has never seen in him before. This will not be a baptism of convenience. Strange as it may seem, the two young bounty hunters have been touched by Grace—and, Link realizes, it didn't happen in a single, sudden Revelation. It has come slowly, like the gradual and patient effect of acid on metal.

But even the hardest metal, the most solid alloy, the most resistant armor, cannot hold out for long in the face of the infinitely destructive power of truth in action, which is *given freely*.

Yuri holds out a sheet of paper to Link.

“What's that?”

“‘Welcome to the Territory,’ Link. I've written another version of your song. You can also use these new couplets and refrains in your own piece, if you want.”

“A song? You're writing songs now?”

Yuri does not answer.

Is he writing? Well, he has written these stanzas, in any case.

Is he writing? Something has wanted to exist through these words, through him, during these past weeks.

Link reads the words written on the paper with care, in total silence. He slowly raises his eyes to meet Yuri's.

“Will it kill you if I give you a compliment?”

“Are you going to make music out of it?”

“It’s like fate,” laughs the boy, showing Yuri his Gibson Les Paul leaning against the hangar wall. “I’m going to write a second version. And just in time, too. I can use it.”

“But all you have left is your guitar!”

Link’s laugh is a spiral of light rising in the dry summer air. Yuri realizes, astonished, that the globe of light is a perfectly integrated reality for him, no longer eliciting any surprise. Link, the Halo-Child: his identity has become indivisible from this transmutation; it is its sudden disappearance that would cause shock and fear now.

“The guitar is the baton I use to conduct the Camp Orchestra—which is now a war machine hovering above Xenon Ridge. The Neomachine is also a recording studio and radio station; it factorizes all the technologies that make it up. The Ark is the Territory Radio multiplied by the Production Studio, which is all multiplied by transfinite Electricity.”

“Transfinite?”

“Electricity is the energetic manifestation of Logos; it is the invisible face of Light, the infinite ‘individuation’ of it. Always remember this: *‘Through faith, we understand that worlds are formed by the word of God, so that what we see comes from what is not visible.’* Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews, 11:3. Your help will be invaluable, I think. My mother says the Agent of the Thing is planning a huge offensive against all of us.”

“The Ark can’t protect us at all?”

“The Mutation has moved into another dimension—it is attacking writing, as you know. The news about the Library isn’t good. But the Neomachine can’t do anything against this specific phase of the devolution. It is still working perfectly against all the others, though, and it becomes more efficient by the hour.”

Yuri thinks: The devolution striking humanity and machines can only be stopped by a singular process of individuation of the Machine that only Link could produce. His successive machines have been able to defeat the devolutionary Mutation in all its forms.

Except one. The antiscriptural devolution that is attacking books—or, more precisely, written language, its external inscription—can only be stopped by the production of a single book.

A book that can tell the story of everything that has happened here, everything that has happened and everything that will happen.

* * *

“That’s it, Yuri. The Orbital Ring started its migration last night. Judith told me; she watched the first departures.”

Yuri raises his eyes instinctively to the sky. In a few days the artificial stars of the Ring will disappear from their nighttime view. Space’s humanity is headed for the planet Mars along with masses of asteroids and moon rocks and the stores of oxygen, carbon, and metals orbiting slowly around their enormous clusters of rockets and orbiters.

This time, it really is the end of human History, the *omega* point. Earth is left alone, humanity delivered back to itself in every sense of the term.

“What will happen if the Thing destroys the Library?”

“My father hasn’t stopped writing for more than a week now; he gathered up all his old manuscripts and shut himself up in his little study. Even the Professor doesn’t dare bother him.”

“Do you really think his manuscript will stop the antisciptural devolution?”

“The Library’s, at least. I know his manuscript contains it, in potential. That manuscript is like a symbolic ‘Territory’ capable of protecting the creatures that live in it—and the books that serve its development. The books we have brought here.”

“And the androids from the Ring?” asks Yuri.

When only silence greets the question, when he sees the well-known dark shadow fall across the face of the boy with the enchanted guitar, when he hears his breathing stop for an instant, Yuri cannot say a word.

He raises his eyes skyward, reflexively.

The zenith has taken on the tint of tarnished silver. To the south, the black-and-bronze shadow of a sandstorm is rising again. To the north, the virginal whiteness of a great blizzard has already engulfed half the sky.

If we want to save this world, our only chance is to destroy it.

Chrysler Campbell has seen many, many men die before his eyes. Often they have died by his hand. More often still they fall to the Territory

ground, touched by this invisible Mithridates who kills with its presence alone.

He has seen many men die. Women, too. And children.

This is the first time he has been present at the death throes of an android.

It is the female, Sky Lumina. She cannot last more than another hour; maybe two, if she is particularly unlucky.

Massive unwriting of lines of DNA pseudocode. General breakdown of vital functions. Organic devolution via the erasing of biogenerative nanoblocks. Loss of memory, linguistic functions, senses of sight, hearing, touch, and balance. Accelerated degeneration of cellular tissues. Systematic extermination of nerve cells. Overall failure of integrated bionic systems. Virulent attack of lymphocytes and erythrocytes. Metabolic malfunctions of all types.

When affecting artificial humans, the Devolution synthesizes all the preceding mutations into a single phase. What is formally distinct in man, as various realities subsisting as a unit in one individual, is only one reality for androids. Writing, language, biology, symbolic, organic, mechanical—all is hybridized in them, and held together only by their original written programming. Even their mysterious individuation, their ability to self-singularize, is inseparable from the rest. If men are indivisible and thus divide all other realities, androids are infinitely divided, and it is their *reality*—the program—that maintains their unity.

Sky Lumina will die.

Her companion, kneeling by her side, knows perfectly well that he is next on the list. He knows it might begin at any second. He knows neither of them will ever see the Ring again. They will die here, on the Earth of the last men. This Earth to which they don't belong, but which has done everything to claim them.

Orson Vectro turns toward Campbell. He has never seen an android cry. He didn't even know it was possible.

"We came here hoping to help you. But we need your help now."

Campbell looks at Paul Zarkovsky; the soldier-monk; Sheriff Langlois and his deputies, Slade Vernier, Erwin Slovak, Bob Chamberlain—all unmoving, tense, silent, reduced to inaction by this force that comes from the *inside* no matter what creature it touches.

"Mr. Vectro, I'm afraid I have to tell you that we're completely powerless against this Devolution."

“I know,” replies the android. “It isn’t your fault. But that’s not what I’m asking you.”

“No? What, then?”

“The Ring has just begun its Great Migration. We didn’t want to abandon the Earth, but we don’t belong to it.”

For a moment, Campbell contemplates the unimaginable.

“You want to try to return to the Ring while there is still time?”

Orson Vectro forces a thin smile. “We’ll be dead long before that, Mr. Campbell. And we don’t wish to join the Great Migration.”

“I don’t understand.”

The artificial man fixes his golden eyes steadily on Campbell’s. “Our orbiters are automated. After they are programmed, their launch is done purely by routine.”

“You said yourself that you wouldn’t have time to get back to the Ring. The launch may be done by routine, but how will you execute a complex orbital approach maneuver?”

“No, I said we wouldn’t have time to get back to the Ring *alive*. And I didn’t say anything about an approach maneuver.”

And Campbell understands. He looks at Sky Lumina’s body, wracked with frenetic movement, her glassy eyes, the foam of saliva on her lips, the blackish spots of various necroses spreading within her. She is lucky. She won’t even last an hour.

Their capsule will be launched into orbit, and then a programmed rocket burn will send the machine into deep space.

It will be their flying coffin, their stellar funerary procession, their heavenly tomb.

They do not belong to the Ring, nor to Earth. They do not belong to Man, nor to the Thing that is replacing it.

They belong to infinity. Sending them back home is the least he can do.

“Transluminary, Yuri. The Ark contains all frequencies, infinitely higher than that of the Light inside the Halo, which is only the visible manifestation of its true nature. Don’t forget that the Halo functions by counterimitating the simulated universe of the Thing. It moves from level to level exponentially, forming a monad, rewriting the principle of individuation directly in the human brain via a magnetic-encephalic

introjection of all the infinity it contains. Within a few days, the Ark will have completely superimposed itself on Earth's entire magnetic field. Then I can move on to the final stage of the program."

"The final stage?"

"I told you once that the rockets launched from the cosmodrome only represented the preliminary phase of putting all Territory men and women wishing to escape the Anome into orbit."

"Link, the androids' orbiter is taking off tonight, but with two corpses on board. It's the last space engine existing in the Territory, and most probably in the whole world."

"I never mentioned rockets or orbiters, did I? I'm talking about 'unconventional technology.' Do you follow me? Should I explain further?"

"The Ark?"

"In the literal sense. The Ark will be a spacecraft—the spacecraft of the World, which will break away from the Neo-World of the Anome."

Yuri closes his eyes for an instant, which seems to last an eternity.

Link's words have taken form in his mind. His brilliant intuition has thrown a ray of light on the mystery—and the mystery has swallowed it.

And what he has glimpsed is unknowable. If he tried to describe it to someone now, no word in his vocabulary would be sufficient to do the job.

Now all the Territory's secrets will fight a merciless war.

Campbell has enlisted the aid of Francisco Alpini, the soldier-monk, and of one of the sheriff's deputies, a man called Virgil Fermont, who studied electronics in the Canadian army before the Fall. They have worked all afternoon alongside the android Orson Vectro, whose metabolic systems are breaking down, one after the other, with the regularity of a digital sequencer. Little by little, his motor and memory functions are affected; soon they will be reduced to nothing. *Nihil*. Null. Overall reduction of his code to zero. The android is dying slowly, perfectly conscious of what is happening to him. Unlike his companion, who fell into a sort of irreversible coma well before succumbing, he remains aware, totally conscious, while his cellular tissues degenerate, his neurons empty by gigamillions per second, entire sections of DNA are erased in each of his cells. At first, Orson Vectro manages without too much difficulty to initialize the orbiter's

basic programs. But as the hours go by, outside help becomes more and more necessary.

The sun is liquefying in a purple-and-gold line on the horizon. Campbell has finished programming the spacecraft, while Alpini and Fermont busy themselves with the last hardware connections and control procedures. Vectro can express himself only through gestures and borborygmi now. Sky Lumina, strapped into her space suit, is unmoving on the seat beside him, like an anodized mummy.

The orbiter is parked in a warehouse up against the north wall of the city, near a rare wide-open gate. They hook the vessel to a Dodge Dakota pickup and tow it outside the Fortress; Orson Vectro is losing consciousness more and more often, and for longer and longer periods, and more and more deeply. Campbell programs the last lines of code for the takeoff procedure, then closes the cockpit.

The artificial man looks at him and twitches his mouth in a weak smile; most of his facial muscles and the limbs of his upper body are already completely paralyzed. Campbell understands that he is thanking him, thanking them, all three of them, all of them.

“You’re welcome,” he says.

The simple phrase says it all. The androids are welcome, down here and up there. And they did not come here for nothing. Both of them acted with pure heroism. An unmotivated act, an act even more dangerous here in the Territory.

Orson Vectro’s eyes close again.

Campbell engages the cockpit’s locking mechanism and backs away from the orbiter. In five minutes the countdown will be over and the ship will return to the sky with two artificial humans aboard. Two dead artificial humans.

At his side, Francisco Alpini is standing almost at military attention. Campbell understands the analogy that is probably taking place in the soldier-monk’s mind. His companion also died in an act of total selflessness; for him, the sky was a bit of North America lost in the Appalachian Mountains. The two astronauts are going to be lost in the depths of a celestial America. It seems always to have been waiting for them. Campbell sees the other man whispering a last prayer, almost silently, for the artificial humans. Then, in unison, he and Alpini make the sign of the cross.

He sees the sheriff, Slade Vernier and a few other deputies, and Link and his mother approaching, followed by Father Newman and almost all the members of the Council of Churches. Yuri is behind them, with Paul Zarkovsky and Milan Djordjevic. Judith Sevigny, bringing up the rear, seems huddled in on herself. The people who welcomed the visitors from space have come to salute their departure. They came. They saw. They learned.

And they died because of it.

Judith Sevigny was the first to communicate with them. She was the one who knew how to bring them here, alive. She was the one who shouldn't have done it.

Campbell can see in her face that she feels responsible for their deaths.

"They measured up," he says to her simply. "They measured up to the Territory."

The day fades slowly. The countdown reaches its final seconds. The orbiter's statoreactor begins pulsing with blue flame; the booster rocket emits a burst of red fire, which condenses into a long orange tail when the vessel takes off, like an airplane at first and then abruptly tipping back to point vertically, turning slowly on its axis.

The whirling dance of the orbital rocket containing the two dead androids seems like an inverted, ascending version of the downward spiral living humanity is experiencing toward the Earth's new ecology, this World that is like a black hole swallowing itself.

They are leaving dead, but they remained free, thinks Campbell.

The capsule disappearing in the zenith in a trail of fire seems to be sending them a final message: *This might be the last freedom remaining in this world.*

45 > *THE IDIOT*

Campbell has been waiting for him to wake up. The sky is a steel-gray vault, the sun a pale spotlight. The Neo-World promises to be neither sinister nor joyous. Simply indifferent. Undifferentiated everywhere and indifferent to everything. Yuri gives his friend a questioning glance, instantly understanding that something abnormal happened during the night.

“You won’t believe it.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that there’s nothing you can’t believe in the Territory, or else the Territory won’t believe in you anymore?”

“It’s not only the Library from Rome that’s being attacked now.”

“I know, Chrysler. Even the plaques on the windmills are—”

“I’m not talking about the plaques on the windmills. I’m talking about *my* library. The military and police journals that belonged to my father.”

Logical, thinks Yuri. The Anome doesn’t differentiate when it comes to what are, for it, nothing but virtually identical pieces of merchandise. It will erase the label on a box of soap and the complete works of Shakespeare without a qualm.

“Link told me they’re looking at a counterattack with his father. We don’t know if it will work, and I have no idea if it will protect your collection. Last I heard, more than seventy books were affected—and you know the progression isn’t stopping, not to mention the levels of reduction.”

“Three volumes on the Normandy landings were erased in a single night. Plus a few small Canadian army technical manuals. Totally erased. Of course they aren’t as important as the Library, but I care about them. And it’s practically the whole military history of the twentieth century.”

Yuri does not answer. For the Anome, war has no need of history. And history has no need of wars.

“I ‘feel’ it now, too, Yuri. I talked to my mother about it. She thinks the Halo has integrated some of the androids’ basic abilities.”

Yuri has met Link in front of his hangar as they planned the previous evening. A meeting with each other, a meeting with destiny, with the future of the war, with *the war of futures*.

“The question remains, is it really him? Is it really him who killed the two astronauts from the Ring?”

“The real question is, is it him who is serving the Devolution, him who has managed to simulate the individuation of the Anome in himself? And the answer is yes.”

“How could he do it?”

“My mother has talked a great deal with Zarkovsky since the astronauts died; they both think this android was the last one, or one of the last ones, to be manufactured before the Fall.”

“I don’t see the connection. How does that explain why your mother is still alive and the others are dead?”

“Don’t you see? Call it the principle of individuation. Let’s say that the Holy Sacrament of Baptism had a unifying effect on my mother, and at the same time it transformed her into a being in whom the various levels of reality are no longer a constant *hybrid* maintained by the program. She isn’t completely human, but she isn’t completely an android anymore, either.”

“Beyond the natural and the artificial. Of course. And that is what has protected her from the latest Devolution, as it did from the others. She’s been immune from the beginning, like you.”

“Exactly, Yuri.”

“And the other android, the one who has come to convert humanity to the Anome?”

“We believe he was completed at the moment of the Metastructure’s death, and that his unprogrammed process of individuation was ‘pirated’ by the antiprogram of the Metastructure, which destroyed itself.”

“A sort of nothingness incarnate? That’s impossible, you know.”

“He is my antinome, Yuri. I was created, but never born. For him it’s the opposite—he was born, but you might say he was never created.”

“He would be like an analogue of God. He can’t *be*.”

“You really have been baptized now; you believe in the Nicene Symbol.”

“You said it, not me. Don’t they say new converts are always the biggest zealots? And I’d rather not even mention Chrysler.”

“Whether it’s ‘possible’ or not doesn’t matter. He isn’t an analogue of God, he is a total inversion of God. It is impossible by definition. But he is, without being. He is not, and yet his nonexistence exists in this world. He is the ultimate Simulacrum. There is a very specific name for that in the Scriptures, you know.”

Yuri does not answer. The sky is illuminated by an aurora borealis that lacquers the clouds of sand and ice whirling in the upper atmosphere with quicksilver. Link has explained to him that the aurora borealis is a consequence of the war the Ark is fighting with the forming neoecology. Tomorrow the elements will strike the Territory again, but they will be sidetracked or partially disrupted by the Neomachine’s magnetic-terrestrial control. The Anome is infinitely persevering. The Ark can fight on all fronts at once. It seems like a battle lost in advance. It seems like what happened on the banks of the Tiber.

He converted to Christianity just as Rome was reduced to cinders, as the Vatican was wiped from the map, as he killed a dozen men in the knowledge that he would have to kill more—many more, probably.

He has converted to Christianity just as the Antichrist is tightening its grip on the world.

It couldn’t have happened any later; he couldn’t be any more adrift, any more off his game. He couldn’t be any closer to the edge of the abyss. There couldn’t be a more dangerous trap. He couldn’t be any closer to the truth, and thus closer to death. He couldn’t be any more in compliance with the Law of the Territory.

In the hangar, a young man holding a guitar connected to a filament of fire stands in his own halo, his own globe of light, a luminous fractal of the ever-transforming world in which he lives.

Music is resonating in the hangar from out of nowhere—or, rather, from the Ark-Orchestra-Studio to which the boy is connected through the invisible face of Light. It fills the entire space with its fluxes and densities. It fills the hangar as if it could devour a world.

The Music is the Logos of electric machines; it is their Word. Through it, machines have access to language and singularity, to difference and identity. Link has known this for a long time now. This original Gibson Les Paul is more than an enchanted machine; it is a machine that enchants, that *chants*;

it is the *instrumentum* that interjects the song of the Word into the Great Monad traversed by terrestrial electromagnetism and into the Individual Monads that people it. This Gibson Les Paul is an energetic materialization of his own mind and his own body; it is the interface between him and the Ark, the control center; it is what communicates with the unknowable, with the infinite. It is what enables communication with all infinities, all unknowables.

It can do the impossible—and, better yet, the unimaginable—precisely because the boy in the Halo imagines it so.

He imagines reality.

The diagrams are internal/external; they are drawing themselves in him now, agitating the Halo with series of waves in every sense. They are an integral part of the continuum.

And the Gibson Les Paul incorporates these diagrams, turning them into plans, compositions of sound, flux and tension, density and intensity, flashes of light, beaches and oceans, abysses and stratospheres—a whole acoustic meteorology that seems to exist only to prove that another world than that of the monodesic neoecology is not only possible but absolutely necessary.

In the Ark, this universe accelerator that feeds on entire worlds, plans are instantly converted into acts, into real infinities. Plans surmount the barrier of Light; they become maps that define territories, and then they become worlds that arise from the singularity, and then they become numbers that attain meaning. They become the moment when Light and Matter, Technology and Spirit, Body and Language are one while yet remaining utterly distinct.

The Music is waves. The only speed greater than that of light is within the infinity of the Music. It is a form of Electricity, whether produced by it or not.

The Music is the secret face of silence. It keeps the Mystery away from indiscreet gazes, where silence usually points the way.

The Music is the sumptuous camouflage of the Word. It is undulatory from its origins to its end. It is electroacoustic, whether one pinches a cord made of animal tissue with the finger or presses a button on a computer keyboard. It shows what is obvious, the better to hide its existence. The

cord's vibration is, in fact, the only oscillatory phenomenon provoking the propagation of an acoustic shock wave in the surrounding area. An electric impedance, even a weak one, is instantaneously produced at the precise moment of the initial pulsation. The same is true for percussion, stricken-string, and even wind instruments—it hardly matters, in the end. Every *instrumentum* is an organum. There is no wave that is not electric.

So now that the climatic pseudowar is about to rage anew above the Territory in order to attain ecological equalization, the hangar has once more become the Bunker of the Fortress. *Welcome to the Territory, Part II.*

Yuri's writing is a series of poetic electrifications of the reality of the Camp-World; in it, the Law of the Territory has become an illustration of the only order possible. Grand Junction is the pivotal axis around which the entire universe revolves. And the Neomachine, without moving even a centimeter, permits it to travel throughout the Territory, throughout Utopia, this neoworld born of a simulation, forming in the real world.

Link travels, he *navigates*, like a cybernetic *kubernator* of the invisible world; the enchanted guitar is his rudder, the Ark his vessel, and he moves infinitely faster than light, so fast that he ends by taking on the process of creation of the Universe itself; he becomes the cruise missile of the Ark, which takes him around the Earth—or, rather, which permits him to circumnavigate it in a simultaneous act without leaving the hangar, the Bunker, the Fortress. He is a train of waves, an oscillatory field; he is the Halo that is encompassing the globe. He is a dance of quarks, a burst of neutrinos; he is this infinite Light that has come to face the anthropological black hole of the End of Man; he is what shields the Territory against the invasion of Utopia; he has come to save the world from the world itself. He is each atom of the Territory; he is all the men that were born and died here, all the men that will be born and die. He is each salvo of the Law.

He is the Halo.

Soon, contradictory elements will clash above the Territory. Soon, thanks to their high energetic potential—*use the enemy's strength*—the Ark will complete its counterworld; it will integrate the whole of the terrestrial Magnetosphere.

Soon they will move into the final stage: *Welcome to the Territory, Part II.*

The Magnetosphere, which *contains* all infinities, will become a Cosmogenesis *in actu*, that which *creates* these infinities.

It will truly be a war of the futures. A war between two competing spaces/times. A war between two absolutely irreconcilable natures.

It is Campbell who gives him the news, as quickly as he can. Yuri sees him coming toward the cabin, understanding immediately that something very serious has happened. Something that Campbell himself considers much more important than the attack on his little military library.

“I just saw the sheriff. There’s been a massacre at Grand Funk Railroad.”

“A massacre?”

“More than a hundred and fifty men and women killed in less than an hour. That’s a massacre, wouldn’t you say?”

“What happened?”

“There was a sort of uprising against the Church of the Anome. People who had been healed by Link’s Machine, or by the Territory Radio before that. They rallied around a guy, a former professor from the University of Texas at Austin.”

“Texas? Does the Professor know him?”

“No, there’s at least twenty years between them; they would never have met. The church has a kind of bishop there, and he’s got a small army commanded by—you’ll never guess—that fucking Belfond and his band of shitheads. They’re the ones who headed up the repression operation, a total twentieth-century military police job. I told you Belfond’s a former cop and a real bastard, right? He’s in charge of the Anome’s Ethical Vigilance Mission. They hunted down this Dr. Blake Williamson and his disciples and executed them publicly. That was two days ago.”

“But what had they done?”

“According to the sheriff’s informers, Williamson claimed that the immortality promised by the Anome was a lure to trap people in a permanent closed-circuit organic recycling system. He told them they wouldn’t be individuals anymore, but just interfaces with one another, and that all their organs would be interchangeable within the network because it’s the Anome that maintains ‘individual’ unity there. Conclusion—humanity will be formed of clones, *totally undifferentiated but all formally different*. He recorded his statements on tape and handed them out—the sheriff was able to recover one of them. Blake Williamson was burned alive after Belfond’s squad killed the others with bullets to the neck. For

blasphemy and mortal heresy. The Professor thinks he must have read Duns Scotus too.”

“And what does the sheriff say?”

Campbell laughs. “Langlois thinks the whole Territory is under his jurisdiction. Langlois thinks nobody has the right to commit a massacre in the Territory. Nobody. Except him. To say he isn’t happy would be putting it mildly.”

Yuri realizes that the moment of confrontation has come. Only the elements, now beginning to unleash their stormy fury above them, will provide a few days’ respite from the peace.

That is, from the worst of the wars.

46 > 2,000 LIGHT-YEARS FROM HOME

It is laid out in concentric circles, like the waves caused by throwing a stone into a pool of water. You can see what has happened physically, see the concrete traces of the war the Ark has waged against the neoecology of the Anome. The whole Territory was the field for this battle between the elements and infinity.

First circle: HNV County, and particularly the township of Humvee, the City of Heavy Metal. Here a magnetic umbrella has shielded the entire area, down to its protective walls.

In a few remote corners of the county, here and there, scattered stretches of *icesand* can be seen amidst the poisonous vegetation that is regaining ground little by little under the Ark's protection.

Then the Territory begins—or, rather, what is left of it.

Yuri leaves his cabin on the morning after three full days of sand-and-ice storms. He finds an unmonitored path that leads to Nexus Ridge and Link de Nova's Neomachine, floating in the air. The two mesas form the natural threshold of the principal southern entrance to HNV County. From this height Yuri can see a large stretch of the north of the Territory, the city of Grand Junction, the cosmodrome, the Monolith Hills strip, the thick woods bordering Lake Champlain, and in the distance the length of Nexus Road, almost to Aircrash Circle—far enough, in any case, for the war map to be seen with perfect clarity.

An undulatory field. The farther one gets from HNV, the more the neodesert gains in consistency—in resistance, in thickness, in density, in homogeneity.

And in invasiveness.

Yuri realizes quickly that Link de Nova's Ark was easily able to protect HMV County, the premises of the Hotel Laika, and the cosmodrome—but that after that the competing armies had violently clashed in the invisible. It is easy to imagine what has become of the south of the Territory, Junkville, Deadlink, and the Ontarian townships.

The Ark is protecting the Territory-within-the-Territory; it is protecting the last Sanctuary of the Law of Bronze. For the rest, it has done what it can against the neoecology—very little, he must admit. It could not prevent the destruction of the Territory's parasitic flora. It could not prevent the denaturation of the Territory's nature. It could not prevent the Territory's unique vegetation from disappearing. Even the hardiest plants were unable to survive such a *transnaturation*. Many trees were uprooted by the winds and are now held to the earth by only the gray-and-bronze gangue enclosing their trunks. Only a few aerial-rhizome plants have managed to survive in this more and more mineral world, islands of photosynthetic life scattered farther and farther apart, condemned to extinction that is less rapid, perhaps, but just as inexorable.

The goldenrod and *Cornus canadensis* are gone, and the red-rooted amaranth, the white lychnis, the buttercups and false wallflowers, the Canadian fleabane, the wild mustard, the *Liatris alba*. There is no more orange hawkweed, no more cowbane, no more hemlock, no more poison sumac. All the *vegetable machinery* in the Territory is gone.

The rising sun is already transforming the landscape into the chrome-colored mud that will eventually cover the terrestrial crust forever. The *icesand* is just one stage of the neoecological change. Rainwater and the constant lukewarm temperatures of this endless day will turn everything to mud, this mud that Yuri is beginning to see appearing in scattered patches all over the *denature* left by the Anome.

One day shortly after the First Fall and the deaths of their respective parents, Chrysler said to Yuri: "Don't be fooled. The Law of the Territory isn't the law of the strongest. At most, you might say it's the law of the cleverest, but that isn't right."

"What is right, Chrysler?" the young teenager named Yuri McCoy had asked.

"It's the law of the most devilish. See the connection? Devilish/ Devil."

“The law of evil?” Yuri had asked incredulously.

“No, no, you’re mixing it up. Evil isn’t bad. On the contrary, it’s very good. It’s the best sparring partner in the Territory.”

“Evil isn’t bad?”

“Evil is devilish. The Law of the Territory is extremely simple, Yuri; it isn’t the law of the strongest or the cleverest, or even the most *devilish* in the diabolical sense, although that comes closest. The one and only Law of the Territory is the law of the one who survives. The law of the one who survives the trap. The law of the one who survives the Territory itself.”

“Darwinism?” the young Yuri had asked, already interested in biology and anthropology.

“The Territory functions according to an evolutionism just as implacable as Darwin’s, but arising from a completely opposite precept, Yuri. In classical evolutionism, only those that adapt survive. And those that adapt en masse are always the most average individuals. During the Fall, the Territory reversed the paradigm: it caused an ecological law to reign that was based on the idea of a trap—a *machine* in the ecological sense—where, for example, the most harmful plants survive better than the others. Here, Yuri, normal individuals aren’t going to have a chance anymore.”

And that is what has happened. Chrysler Campbell has survived because he is the human computer, for whom improvisations are, more than anything else, ultrarapid algorithms. A man capable of calculating the death of another man like someone else would solve an equation. Yuri, too, has survived; he is the one who can always sense the invisible presence of death; he has made a nocturnal companion of it. For him, intuition is the Territory trap, speaking to him.

The weakest ones, men and women, were enslaved in the prostitution centers and gladiatorial arenas of Junkville, Monolith South, and Grand Funk Railroad. Those who revolted were killed, but most of them *adapted* and submitted to the Law of the Triads, the tribal chiefs who were in a position to share the pie.

But there were still independent traffickers, sharpshooters, freelancers, bounty hunters, hired killers, private detectives. Sheriff Langlois and his men. Those who made war in places where the average man could not survive.

Now, though, the neoecology has returned to equalize everything, to put classical Darwinian adaptation back in the hands of the average man, the

average world. It is a notch above the Metastructure's wildest dreams: overall homogenization. The expansion of the desert toward the north exhausts the desert. The extension through blizzards of the Arctic toward the south is exhausting what remains of ice floes and glaciers. It is above the Territory that their respective depletions have come together. And this double depletion has manifested itself in a mingling of one with the other. It is not a desert of sand or a desert of ice that is finally covering the territory, but their *hybrid*, to form the world of mud, the formless world, the world of eternally recommencing overall depletion.

Yet the Territory could have been the perfect experimental habitat for a true Third Humanity—the first destroyed by the Flood, the second by the Metamachine—whose glorious destiny would have been to pave the way for the real Second Coming, thinks Yuri to himself, full of strange nostalgia for a world that will never be. Instead of this *absolutely necessary* future, as Spinoza would have called it, there is the Devolution of Humanity wished for, desired, and provoked by itself, after first having slowly committed suicide, fitting itself up for a terminal Darwinian solution, that of adaptation to nothing, of its transformation into a collective, nonindividated organ, a multiorganism made of millions of clones that are *effectively indifferentiated yet formally distinct*.

Oh yes, the man burned alive by the Anome's militia definitely read Duns Scotus, just as the Professor believes. Duns Scotus and undoubtedly several others. He read a handful of Christian authors and he died for it.

Suddenly, Yuri senses that he is being watched.

His sixth sense is not to be doubted. You don't doubt something that was created by the Law of the Territory.

He keeps walking until he can make a complete half-turn on himself without alerting his observer. *To see, you must not be seen.* ...

He is definitely being watched.

All the dazzling intelligence he is continuously proving to himself and others is suddenly gone.

He is being watched. He is at the center of someone's attention.

He is nothing but a common rock orbiting—and being consumed by—her solar beauty.

Paul Zarkovsky has never seen Milan Djordjevic cry. He feels lost, awkward. He feels useless.

“Milan,” he says brokenly. “I know you’re doing the best you can.”

Djordjevic doesn’t answer; he stares unseeingly out the window at the landscape surrounding the trailer-library.

Paul Zarkovsky knows the full extent of the damage. More than two hundred works attacked in one fell swoop. Twice as many as they have already lost, totally or partially, in the last month. One book out of every forty now, including some very early printed books. And that isn’t counting the various Bibles in different stages of complete annihilation. The storm only amplified the phenomenon.

Zarkovsky guesses that the latest attack can give them an idea of the rhythm the destruction to come will follow. Certainly there are reasons to be seriously alarmed; certainly there are reasons to break down in tears—especially if you know the fate of the Library is in your hands. If you know it is only through your writing that the *unwriting* can be stopped.

“Djordjevic, pull yourself together. We’re at war. Total war. How is your manuscript coming?”

“I’m getting there, Paul; I’m getting there. I’m condensing the three earlier versions into one, and it’s really taking shape, but it’s as if the Thing can guess what I’m doing, as if it is picking up speed in order to beat me. In the end, it might be all I can do to write the manuscript that *could have* stopped the antiscriptural attack.”

“You don’t have the right to be that pessimistic. An old French royalist author once said that despair in politics is the worst kind of idiocy.”

“Politics? You mean Charles Maurras?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m talking about *cosmopolitics*. The War of the Worlds. The one we’re fighting. We can’t allow ourselves to lose. You’re going to finish the manuscript, Milan, and not only are you going to finish it in time, you’re going to write exactly what needs to be written. And do you know why?”

“The famous Law of the Territory, I presume?”

“No. Your own law, Milan. Your pride, well hidden as it is, is all-consuming. I want you to use it. To make an army out of it.”

“My pride?”

“You have always hated it that I regularly beat you at chess. I also remember how witheringly you treated certain university professors who

didn't have your theological or philosophical knowledge. People told me that in Italy you didn't allow anyone to pontificate on subjects you were an expert in. You have to hate this Thing, Milan. You have to have a burning desire to give it the thrashing of its life. Do you understand me?"

Milan nods slowly, silently.

"But you're right—it is always the famous Law of the Territory. We're part of this Territory now—or, rather, as the young bounty hunters say, the Territory is part of us."

Milan Djordjevic looks at Paul Zarkovsky for long moments, still not speaking. Then, finally, he gives him a faint smile, behind which the Professor glimpses the presence of a will of Bronze. The Law is taking form in their bodies, he thinks.

Yuri stops walking and looks at Link, who is climbing the mesa ahead of him. His guitar is slung across his back, not held there by anything. Yuri has seen this happen several times now; the guitar orbits around the boy's body in response to his invisible, inaudible, countless commands. It is an extension of his body-mind, but not a prosthetic extension. It is an *internal extension*.

They are a few meters away from the Ark now, twenty at most.

"Link. I'm not going any farther."

"Are you afraid, Yuri? I know everyone is keeping their distance from the Neomachine, but I don't know why. It's illogical."

"It's *logical*, Link. The Ark is a singular extrojection of you. You share the Halo. That isn't the case for us, for we other humans."

"Come on, Yuri. I promise, you aren't in any danger."

"You won't get me to enter the Halo, I warn you."

"You're wrong. You would have a very interesting experience."

"Very interesting and quite deadly, I imagine."

"Yuri, the Ark is the Tree of Life. If you respect it, nothing can happen to you. Come on; come with me."

Yuri looks at Link for a moment, sighs resignedly, and begins climbing again toward the summit of the ridge.

The Ark is there, resplendent, floating forty feet above the ground. It is a globe of matter/light around ten meters in diameter. Two circles of a vibrating substance at once multiple and unique, immutable and yet

metamorphosing endlessly at the speed of light, are soldered to each other transversally. This is what the musical instruments, the recording studio, the Territory Radio have become. They turn slowly on themselves in the opposite direction of the Earth's rotation. The silvery tubes of the church organ crown them like a mercurial diadem that seems to project a series of nearly invisible waves toward the sky.

Link has entered the Machine's Halo, his own globe of light preserving its autonomy even as it merges with the larger one.

Yuri is less hesitant to enter the Halo than he is to join Link. The Ark, he knows, will place them in a state close to what pre-Fall humans called *neuroconnection*.

Their brains will be joined, while yet remaining distinct.

But this junction will be enough. Enough for him to know, enough for him to learn and understand.

And that, Yuri can hardly bear more easily than keeping his secret. The truth is as insufferable as lying.

Link stretches out a hand to him in invitation.

"Come, Yuri. Join me in the Halo. Without me you can't enter, but I want to share the Voyage to Infinity with you."

Yuri does not answer; he walks slowly toward the globe of light, which is brushing the rocky ground with its radiance.

Infinity. He experienced a kind of human version of it less than an hour ago.

He was facing her.

His heart had exploded, every molecule of his body bursting, his blood drained from him by an invisible pump.

She was more beautiful each time. He was more in love each time. It was as pure as an equation. It was as senseless and stupid as the world itself.

But it was vastly more beautiful. It was the explosion of a star, a diamond sparkling in the depths of night.

At the same time as the flash took possession of him, he sensed the shadow descending. The shadow of terrible doubt, one of the terrible intuitive messages that Death-in-action sent him so often. In the language of the Territory. The language of secrecy. The language of the invisible. The flash said: *It's now or never*. The shadow said: *It's already too late*.

He approached her. She did not move. Their eyes met.

Strangely, it was the dark doubt, more than the intense light from which it came, that made him act, that made him speak, that made him put his actions into words and his words into actions.

“You shouldn’t be here. But I shouldn’t, either, I know.”

“Indeed.”

“Why are you breaking the sheriff’s rules?”

“You’re not breaking them?”

“Why did you come to the ridge, in other words?”

Their gazes riveted, soldered, nailed to each other. A faint smile.

“I followed you.”

Yuri swallows a pound of stones. “Followed?”

His voice is oddly broken, as if he were speaking from a distant space station.

“Yes.”

Just that. Yes. Three letters. There is a long silence between the space station and the earth base. He is two thousand light-years away from Judith. He has never been so close to her.

But he could be closer still.

Yes, closer.

Much farther away than that.

Crystal clarity in epigenesis at the center of his being. He understands, thunderstruck, that love can exist only through an infinite distance between two beings; that it is this immeasurable distance that permits the true junction, the Grand Junction, that of Infinity in action, that of two true singularities.

He realizes that this is it, that their skin is about to touch, their nerves to kindle, their lips to meet, in a millennia-old gesture.

A gesture that has just been born.

Link says simply:

“I knew it. Please don’t worry. I noticed a while ago that she was always watching you. Very discreetly, of course. Our destinies were never meant to cross. I have never been truly human. I’m here for a mission of which I am not even in command.”

“Like the soldier-monk from the Vatican?”

“He is the one that resembles me the most in that way. I obey a law that takes precedence even over that of the Territory. Now we are going to connect with the Infinite in act, and we will be able to travel within a humanity disindividuated by its own Devolution; we are going to travel within its secret world.”

“What secret world?”

“Utopia. This world is two-sided; everything is dual with the Anome. The neoecology we are seeing at work is the visible face of its underground world. That’s where we’re going.”

And Yuri realizes that Link is suggesting nothing less than that they descend together into the depths of Hades.

He will not let Link out of his sight. He is a Man of the Territory. He was trained by Chrysler Campbell. Charon himself had better beware.

“Don’t expect to find anything known or heard of before. We are traveling to the processive face of the ultimate Simulacrum. We are traveling to Infinity. But we are going inside the Nothingness in act.”

“Let’s roll, Link.”

And he makes the mistake of his life. The only one. The worst one. The one that will save him.

He cannot be absolutely certain of the moment when he makes a pact with the Ark. He cannot be certain of the extent to which the pact is inalterable. He cannot know that touching a fingertip to Infinity has consequences of the same scope.

He cannot know that, in man, two infinities cannot cohabitate. He does not know the sacrifice he is making.

Link smiles at him and says: *It’s rolling.*

And the light is. It *is*, with all its being. Infinite.

He is disintegrated by this Light, but instantly reborn in another form.

He too is surrounded by a halo within an entire cosmos made of various forms of light, more or less dense, more or less rapid, of all chromatic variations, all wavelengths.

Link is facing him, surrounded by his own globe of light.

“Your individuation is rejoining its principle. Don’t worry.”

“Where are we?”

“From one point of view we’re in the Ark. From another, we’re at the other end of the universe. And from a third, the one that matters, we are in the process of integrating the hidden face of Utopia.”

“What will happen?”

“The infinite globe will disappear. We will have only our halos to protect us.”

“Protect us from what?”

“Protect us from that.”

And that really is *that*. The Thing. The creationary Thing. The numeric reification of the individual. It is not quite the Nothingness, but it is far from being any kind of world. It is an intermediate, limbic state that resembles a virtual version of the neoecology that the Thing is inflicting on the World.

Yuri realizes that they are in the heart of the *metaphysical* machine of the new humanity. The one wishing to become an organic network. He realizes that the Ark, with its infinite speeds, is a machine permitting access to all successive worlds—including the world of concepts, of ideas. Including the world of thought in act.

“We are not in any particular brain, Yuri; we are inside the act of human thought itself. We are face-to-face with the principle that is going to disindividuate Humanity for the benefit of its successor, Anomanity. What we called Unimanity in the era of the Metastructure was only a poor thumbnail sketch. This is the Thing, life-size.”

They are floating, motionless, inside an immense black box made of millions of identical boxes stacked into four walls as high as mountains. This ghostly cube is a world, Yuri realizes. But it barely exists; it is not really concrete, not really alive, not really a world. It is hardly real, but it is as big as a universe. It is as big as a man. It is as big as Man.

“Before the Fall—I mean before my creation—I produced a similar neurouniverse. It was incorporated by the Metastructure at the moment of its death, and the Post-Machine, the devolutionary mutation that succeeded it, enlarged it to the size of a world. Our world.”

“Before your creation?”

“I *was* before *being*; that is why I was not born. That must be part of the narrative my father has to write in order to stop the destruction of the Library. Before the Fall, I was created from the *intensified inversion* of a spectral being that lived in the aqualung under the hotel dome. A series of

phenomena allowed me to leave this neurouniverse I was living enclosed in, and to appear in the world; but at the same time, the Metastructure collapsed, and my birth counterproduced *this*—and, consequently, humanity wishes to connect to it permanently; that is, to itself, but without any more real mechanical or organic singularity. My hypersingularity is causing the destruction of human singularities by humanity itself.”

Yuri contemplates the dizzying heights above them, and the bottomless cubic abyss under their feet. The four walls of the immense box in which they are floating, quivering gently, reveal nothing but the endless repetition of the same motif.

Boxes. Black boxes all the way to infinity.

“The Thing is trying to copy God down to the smallest detail, Yuri. Never successfully, of course. It has created this black megabox in an attempt to imitate God’s principal tool of actualization, an angel called Metatron. When I was the Child-in-the-Box under the dome in the Hotel Laika, I didn’t really know what I was doing; I had not yet been created. It knows what it is doing, but it lies. It is only a simulation; never forget that.”

“But what can we do, Link?”

“Can’t you see?”

“No; I’m sorry, all I see is a ghostly universe without any substantial reality, formed of an infinite fractal repetition.”

“That’s true, Yuri, all true; the Anome can only achieve existence through the humans who become what it is, and, in fact, who are what they become—their own devolution. But for them to become it, they have to want it. And for them to want it, they can’t have even the tiniest bit of desire left in them.”

“What can we do against that?”

“Reinitialize a source of true desire. Reinitialize a Voice. Reinitialize a singular form of music. Understand?”

“Here? The Territory Radio?”

“Yes, Yuri. I have my own antenna with me—the good old Gibson. And that might have only limited reach, but I am going to disturb this organization with the Supreme Office itself.”

“The Supreme Office?”

“Electricity-Logos. The machine become performer, become poetry, become thought. *Welcome to the Territory, Yuri, Part II*. I told you your version would be useful.”

So the electricity *is*. Logos, voice, word, song. The riff is a chain of solid waves in the spectral field of stacked black boxes. It is light-matter-energy; it is sense-form-beauty; it is an oscillatory field flashing in the false infinity of the Metaphysics of posthumanity.

Right into the head, thinks Yuri. *Empty the gun right into the head*.

But the Thing has no head, as it is seeking a form of general acephalization. All the electricity in action can do is pursue, but on a much larger scale, a cosmopolitical scale, which the Ark has been able to do from the moment of its creation. It illuminates the millions and millions of black boxes from the inside, so many personalities enslaved by one or another of the Anome's Devolutions. On each of these "coffins," where the principle of singular individuation of the human beings touched by the mutation is withering away, Yuri can see a funerary plaque where long series of binary numbers are etched. Lines of ones and zeros that summarize the organism in numeric functions, that transform the life into numbers, that identify the individual as the ensemble of its numbers. Yuri realizes in a blinding flash of light that each plaque is connected to all the others via the infinite numeric series they form altogether. The boxes bring together all the numbers of the Aristotelian series, down to the last whole number, which gives the whole its false unity, its false infinity. The Great Number of Humanity is there. One can interpolate all the numbers, all the ones and zeros that make it up, the form, the sense; but the actuality of its existence will not change an iota. The Great Number is the Great Number, however its digits are arranged. The Great Number is neohumanity in action.

It is now that the Camp Orchestra becomes *absolutely necessary*.

Yuri sings in unison with Link de Nova: *Welcome to the Territory, you enter the zone of the final floor. ... Welcome to the Territory, I am the great division without any rest*. And the light zigzags across the false infinity of boxes, it zigzags from one box to the next; light rises up in its path. It reindividuates language with each burst of light; it defies the Anome on its own turf. They are metasonic pirates; they are the Camp Orchestra; they are the rock 'n' roll of infinities in action; they are electricians of the divine machine. They are not angels, but Yuri knows they are working for them; they are their Territory experts. They are the ones that must stop the Thing; they are the ones that must stop the terminal synthesis of the apocalyptic Beasts; they are the ones that must stop Humanity itself.

Welcome to the Territory, fuckin' bitch.

Their work as electricians of the divine light does not stop there. At one point Link winks at him and says: “You’re really going to be a member of the Camp Orchestra now. Play the organ.”

And Yuri sees a large plane of light materialize under his fingers, a plane on which three keyboards of varying length are superimposed. Raising his eyes, he can see somewhere above the Halo the tubular, silvery presence of the Great Organ, built of sonic rockets en route to the beyond of the Box-World, a part-mineral, part-vegetable harrow deploying its aerial seeds to infinity.

He does not know where the knowledge comes from; it is truly strange. His hands play on the keyboards, his fingers arranging themselves on the keys to form chords, accompanying Link in tonality changes, strengthening the sonorous density and the percussive intensity, and all of it serves to transmute Electricity itself. The organ becomes the source of an efflorescence with ramifications as infinite as the metacube within which they oscillate, elementary particles agglomerated in their light.

It is the entire rhizomic, poisoned jungle of the Territory that is deploying all its weaponry here—the one that has been totally destroyed in the “real” world. The one that is being reborn in the slipstream of light.

“See your role, Yuri? You are the Man of the Territory. The Man of Traps. The Man of the Floral Machine. You are the one needed here to fight the neoecology of the Anome.”

“Welcome to the Territory, Link.”

And Link smiles as widely as Yuri has ever seen him smile, as he clutches his Gibson again, and the chords of the riff burst forth in all directions in the very heart of humanity, the very heart of the thought it creates, the very heart of its own metaphorical representation.

The very heart of the Nothingness.

Over the course of the following days, the Ark becomes a cosmogenesis in Action, and Link begins to draw up his plans for the Vessel. It is the work of an engineer of Light, an astronaut of Infinity—the work of an electric boy, a machinist of the Monad, a semantician of the living. It is *his* work.

The Vessel will be powered by the energy of infinity in action. Like the Ark, it will travel inside the infinity it contains. But unlike the Ark, it will

also *physically* move at the speed of light in order to bypass, simultaneously, all the speeds infinitely superior to it.

“The Ark is an antenna,” Link tells Yuri. “It is anchored at a precise point on the magnetosphere. The Vessel is based on the same metatechnology as the Ark, but their uses and finalities will be different. And their sizes, too, of course.”

For an entire piece of the Territory will be contained within the halo of the Vessel.

All of Humvee, to start. And the cosmodrome premises. And finally the Hotel Laika. This will be the base trinomial.

It will be as big as a football stadium.

It will be brighter than a supernova.

It will be darker than a black hole.

It will be just barely visible, and yet it will be all one can see.

47 > *THIS TOWN AIN'T BIG ENOUGH FOR BOTH OF US*

One morning, Milan Djordjevic emerges from the trailer-library. The air is pure. The sun is rising in a white cloud. Djordjevic fills his lungs with morning oxygen, stretches his muscles, lets his skin shiver in the cool early-morning light.

He has done it. He has finished the book. He has put a period at the end of the last sentence in the manuscript, structured it correctly, ensured that the narrative begins on itself, with the historiography of the Metastructure and the men who still know how to slip through its cracks, the terminal geopolitics of the last men, and the placement of the Territory of Grand Junction as a metaphorical composite of all the plots it contains.

For the first time in weeks, Djordjevic sensed a sudden ceasing of the antiscriptural invasion during the night. After a few corrections, shortly before dawn, he had confirmation of it.

The narration of the genesis of their own existence—all of them: himself, Link, Link's adoptive mother, the dog Balthazar, Sheriff Langlois—permitted the central emergence of Yuri McCoy and Chrysler Campbell; it cut off the active principle that ordered the attack against the Library, and made possible new freedoms and new necessities. It caused the literary/imaginary continuation of the human brain against the immortal disindividuation promised by the Anome.

The morning is clear. The sun gilds the Plexiglas surfaces with crystal.

The Library is safe.

The book exists.

There is still hope.

* * *

That same day, they learn that he is going to Grand Funk Railroad. Him. “The Processor of the Anome,” as he insists on calling himself. The brutal repression carried out by Belfond and his death squad did not solve anything in Grand Funk Railroad; quite the opposite. Now the Anome’s local bishop seems to be having more and more difficulty “selling his merchandise,” as the sheriff says. Yuri realizes that their voyage to Utopia was not without effect. For the first time they have taken back the initiative, the control of operations; for the first time, an authentic counterattack has taken place.

The sheriff doesn’t know this, but that doesn’t matter. The sheriff knows the rest. He knows the essential part.

Now he says: “We are going to organize an expedition to maintain order in Grand Funk Railroad. Half of the deputies and a quarter of the militia. I’m declaring the county in a state of siege.”

Yuri thinks: *In the secret Language of the Territory, that means the sheriff is going to bring the Law of Bronze with him. He won’t let anyone get in the way. He won’t let anyone try to change the Law of the Territory. He won’t let anyone get close without permission. He is its Guardian. He won’t let anyone chip away even a fragment of it. He is its Image. He won’t let anyone invade its Sanctuary. He is the Law itself.*

He will not give anyone the right to determine life and death for the Territory’s inhabitants, the subjects under his jurisdiction, the people he has sworn to *serve and protect*.

He will not allow this right to anyone but himself.

That is, to It. The Law. The Law, which is everything he is, everything he has always been, everything he ever will be.

“You are all authorized to open fire at the slightest indication of a threat. And you are required to open fire if this threat becomes manifest, or if there is even the shadow of a doubt. Don’t forget that a knife is a weapon—even a simple fork is a weapon. Don’t forget that a man can kill with his bare hands. And don’t forget that only a dead man can be considered truly removed from combat. And even then he can’t be trusted.”

Yuri allows himself a thin smile. Under his breath he is humming Link’s song, which is now an integral part of his spirit; all his crucial experiences are condensed in it: *Welcome to the Territory, there’s a law you can’t deny, there’s a hole inside your head, the trap is called booby body, Welcome to*

the Territory, if you don't know its name, it will be pleased to try you as a new game.

* * *

"I know you're going to think I'm a nuisance as usual, Sheriff, but I don't think this is the way to go."

Silence crashes like an Airbus onto the steppes of the Territory. Yuri thinks: Campbell has been able to gain the respect of the sheriff and all his deputies; he is almost considered one of them now.

"I'm listening, General."

Campbell ignores the irony. Yuri doesn't even see him blink; his face betrays nothing. It is even less expressive than an android's. The human computer is following its program, oblivious to outside accidents.

"Sending sixty men to Grand Funk Railroad won't accomplish a thing. I have my informers, too, Sheriff. My radio works. For example, I know that Belfond's special squad is made up of thirty men, but those thirty head up a shock militia of more than six hundred sturdy men in the service of the bishop of Grand Funk—not to mention all the armed forces of the Territory's neohumanity. The Powder Station Triads have gone over to their side; they are, as they say, armed and dangerous."

"What do you suggest? A tactical response? Should we have a little bowling party?"

"No. A real chess game. We have to bear down on them with all we've got. Two hundred men at the very least, and we leave fifty or sixty to guard the county and serve as backup if needed. Basically, I'm suggesting that we reverse the terms of your equation, Sheriff."

Langlois measures him up calmly, silently, a faint smile on his lips. "That's not an order-maintaining operation, it's a military intervention."

"I thought you understood that this is war, Sheriff."

Even as he says the words, Campbell reads in Wilbur Langlois' eyes that he understands it perfectly; he is the Man of the Law of Bronze, the man who decides death.

And the Law of Bronze is the spinal column of the ruse; it is the visible face of the trap; it is a machine, and thus it absorbs everything that can serve its expansion. It adapts very fast. So fast that one might say it is adaptation itself.

So the sheriff adapts.

“Fine. All squad chiefs, rendezvous in the bus for a new briefing immediately. Overall change of procedure. We’re going to look at another expedition.”

There is perhaps a gleam of signaling light, just a furtive flicker on objects and shadows.

Perhaps a bit of gold and quicksilver vaporizing in the air, in an intangible powder made of ephemeral glimmers.

Perhaps the Halo is there after all, just before the voice. The voice that says:

“You are right to want to change plans, Sheriff Langlois, but neither yours nor Chrysler Campbell’s has a chance of working. There is only one force capable of measuring up to the Anome and its agents, and you know it.”

Everyone turns in a single movement toward the source of the voice, the source of the Halo, the source of the truth.

Link is creating reality, thinks Campbell.

He is reality.

That, they say, is how the Legend is born. Just two vehicles will descend from Heavy Metal Valley toward the extreme southwest of the Territory, to the limits of Ontario and the state of New York.

Two vehicles and eight men, including an adolescent boy living in a globe of light that contains all possible infinities. Two vehicles: Campbell’s Ford Super Duty pickup—which he is driving—and an enormous Dodge Ram 3500 driven by the sheriff himself. Eight men: the Halo-Child and his seven mercenaries. Two vehicles, a transfinite child, seven men, and seven guns.

A Halo-Child and the seven black angels who are his human barricade, his shield of Bronze, the armed Law, the Law of the Territory. Yuri McCoy; Chrysler Campbell; Sheriff Langlois; Frank Lecerf, the young French sharpshooter; Erwin Slovak, the man who always knows *where things are happening*; Scot Montrose, the former Canadian intelligence officer from southern Ontario, who knows this part of the Territory very well; and Francisco Alpini, the soldier-monk from the Vatican who had absolutely

insisted on joining the expedition. These are the men who will be remembered in the Legend.

They cross the seventy kilometers between HNV and the city of Grand Funk Railroad practically in a straight shot. For Link de Nova, it is a first. For the sheriff and his men, it is the extreme limit of their known domain. For Yuri and Campbell, it is just a township like all the others.

Except that the Antichrist has chosen it as a temporary residence.

They see packs of stray dogs, foxes, lynxes, deer, some caribou, and hordes of wolves and Canadian wildcats that have come down from the north; it is as if the last animals in the Territory are accompanying them on their mission. They also notice a flock of large purple crows soaring in the tarnished chrome-colored sky, veiling the alabaster-glazed sun. Yuri senses the incident several minutes before it happens. His intuition. Animals from the north. The group they form. The bonds that exist. The invisible networks of the Territory.

It is Link, in the backseat, who suddenly points a finger at a four-footed animal silhouette trotting rapidly along the road.

Balthazar. The Hotel Laika's bionic dog. The sheriff's dog. The dog who can speak, who does not follow the pure animal instinct of the Territory's other canines. Yuri realizes that he is simply going where they are going, by his own means, asking nothing of anyone.

Balthazar has a very particular relationship with the Halo-Child. The Hotel Laika is their junction point. They share the secret of Link's birth. They belong to an earlier story.

Campbell stops the pickup on the side of the road and invites the dog to jump into the truck bed.

A Halo-Boy and his guitar, seven armed men, and a cyborg dog. A new diagram has been drawn; it seems complete now. Seven killers, a child-supermachine, and a nearly human dog. There are not even ten of them. They are not even all human. They are going to face an army. Worse—a mob. The Legend is about to be born.

The world is collapsing in on itself; they are facing the black hole it has become. In the distance, Campbell sees the city born of the junction of a storage depot and the old Canadian National line with the elevated structure of the magnetic aerotrain.

A township of around ten thousand souls, branching out from the railroad intersection, at the southern edge of the Ontarian part of the Territory.

WELCOME TO GRAND FUNK RAILROAD, proclaims a rusted sign.

Welcome to the black hole, he corrects silently.

This black hole is what Humanity desires to become, what it *is* becoming thanks to the Anome, that incarnation of specic mutation via the *mediation* of an android born at the moment of the Metamachine-World's death, which is now in a position to substitute itself completely as both a neohumanity and a neoecology.

The collision with Link will be that of two totally incompatible universes—*impossible*, to use the words of Leibniz, several of whose works Yuri is currently reading and about which he talks endlessly. And yet there are only two vehicles, a luminous child, an old genetically modified dog, and seven men armed to the teeth. Almost nothing, compared to Nothingness made real.

This weakness might be our biggest strength, thinks Campbell.

They may not have brought two hundred men, but the Law of the Territory has come with them.

The mob is visible from afar. It is concentrated in the city of Grand Funk Railroad, but people are arriving in giant crowds from all the neighboring townships and even from Junkville—that is, from Deadlink. Thousands and thousands of men. Women. Children. The mass is condensing in Bullet Train Plaza, where the headquarters of the local Anomian episcopate have been established in an old administrative building dating from the twentieth century and recently restored. This is where Bishop Edgar Dorset has his offices. Just across from these are the central offices of the Evangelization Commission and, a few buildings away, the headquarters of the secret police, headed up by Belfond and his men.

The mob is everywhere.

And, facing the mob, on the top steps leading to the great doors of the bishopric, there are men. Men they know; men they recognize—or will soon.

Men and women.

Johnson Belfond is there with his two deputies, the old gladiatrix from the strip and the Korean American from New Arizona, and twenty or so professional killers of both sexes, all of them heavily armed.

Jade Silverskin is there, now the bishop of Junkville, accompanied by a guard of men from the Triads of Clockwork Orange and Vortex Townships, recognizable by their uniforms.

There is a large man with a black beard tied up with cord, wearing the same luxurious vestments as his colleague. This is the local bishop, Edgar Dorset.

And there is the man standing in front of all of them, dressed very simply in a gray suit and bronze shirt. He is speaking to the mob. He seems *almost* human.

It's him, Yuri realizes immediately.

* * *

“Through me, humans become free and equal like androids, the latest-generation androids, the immortal androids. The Anome asks for nothing but your absolute faith in her/him and the opening of your mind and body to its Presence. You will perceive it as an absence, of course, but you have no need to worry. This emptiness is the emptiness that lies at the center of all things, all worlds. It is by accepting this emptiness into yourself that you will allow the Anome to save you from death, guaranteeing you, through my reign, immortality on this Earth.”

At first the mob remains silent. Yuri and Chrysler Campbell part the compact mass like a double-sterned boat, while the others surround Link like a pentagonal shield, with Balthazar covering them. They are the Law of the Territory, the Law in arms, the Law in action.

They are the Witnesses. This is what they see and hear. This is what they do, what they say, and what remains in memory. This is what will become the Legend.

“What I am promising you is nothing less than Eternal Life. By paying homage to the Anome you will diminish its divine anger, and it will allow you to become part of the great collective whole that will succeed the defunct humanity.”

“Are you offering us a return to the dead Metastructure?” calls out a voice from the crowd.

A few laughs are heard, then cut off by an authoritative gesture from the Android-King.

“No, I am not suggesting a return to the old order, which is truly dead. What I am offering you is, as I have said, Eternal Life.”

“How?” cries another voice. “How do you plan to do that?”

“Are you God? Or maybe a resurrection of the Metastructure?” someone yells sarcastically.

“Do not be so ready to laugh at what you do not understand. If I speak to you of Eternal Life it is because the Anome is capable of offering it, just as it has shown to what extent it can bring you eternal death, and worse than that, too. But its leniency is boundless; she/he has chosen to spare the humans who pay homage to her/him.”

“Are we supposed to worship your invisible God/Goddess?” a voice calls.

“Worship is the right word, but it will be an exchange. A *sacrifice*. Eternal Life cannot be bought like a jar of jam in Neo Pepsico. The Anome will come to live inside you. Totally. It will not be a simple bio-connection like it was with the Metastructure of Bygone Times, but rather the creation of a new entity made of each of you and of the totality of the Anome—that is, of you all, neohumanized. I am not your so-called Christ, but I have much more to offer you—because what I can offer is the means for all of you to become like gods. To be God is to be capable of incarnating in a single individual while remaining an infinite Totality. That is what Christ falsely did more than two thousand years ago. But the true Time has come. And I announce to you today that immortality can be created within you by your own desire, your own individuality, which you will sacrifice so that the Anome can be wholly born in you. Then you will be like me, the one who is bringing you Eternal Life, who is pronouncing your transformation into components of the Great Totality.”

It is at this moment, according to the Legend, that the seven Guardians of the Territory, the bionic dog, and the Halo-Child make their appearance at the bottom of the wide colonial-style staircase.

The seven men and their militarized dog surround this adolescent boy in his fiery Halo like a human shield—*human and mechanical*—their weapons pointed outward like the stingers of a poisonous Territory plant.

The young man interrupts the Anome’s Android-Pope with a speech of his own—clear, solid, and without the slightest concession regarding the

nature of the Word incarnate, His Coming, Eternal Life, Sacrifice, Redemption, or Freedom.

He speaks, people will say, with the authority of a centuries-old sage.

And, they will say, he has all the violence within him of a child abandoned by the world.

They will say many things, which is normal; after all, it is only a Legend.

“Do you claim to be Christ?” asks the Android-King of the Territory.

“No, I have only come to proclaim him.”

“Ah ha! Then why didn’t you proclaim my coming? Where were you, little prophet? I must admit, however, that your special effect of being a lightbulb on legs is truly remarkable.”

Laughter erupts from the mob. The artificial man knows how to present himself as the complete synthesis of the pedagogy of the masses, the cabaret comedian, the political leader and the theosophist visionary.

“I was exactly where I needed to be,” replies the child in the Halo. “Because you are not He. You are His absolute opposite, in fact. You are the Antichrist and you know it.”

“I am the Antichrist? I am the Antichrist, even though I save thousands of lives every day? You’re joking, lightbulb.”

“You are only saving them to enslave them to the Thing, of which you are just the agent. And you know there is another force saving them as well, and in much greater numbers than your demiurge.”

“Ha ha! The agent of the ‘thing’? The ‘thing’? What ‘thing’? Are we in a bad twentieth-century science-fiction movie?”

The mob’s laughter is louder this time. Yuri knows that Link de Nova’s spectacularly bizarre appearance isn’t helping his cause. The austere simplicity of the Android, compared to the showiness of his own bishops, makes him look much more like a real prophet than this boy living in a “virtual electric lightbulb” and his seven mercenaries armed to the teeth. Yuri realizes that the Android himself is a trap; he is an incarnate machine—not a human computer, but the opposite: calculation, dehumanization itself. Yuri realizes that everything about the Android is, ontologically, a simulation. And that is what will ensure his domination over what remains of humanity in this world.

But, they will say, none of this impresses the boy with the guitar from the county of Heavy Metal, the boy from the Hotel Laika, the boy from the cosmodrome.

“The ‘Thing’ I mean is what you call the Anome—probably on its orders, because it *wants a name*, and only a man can give it one; or, rather, a creation of man, which you are. But you won’t accomplish anything.”

“Poor little dismissive jackass. Do you know what I have undertaken, thanks to the Anome, which is the true Demiurge of this world? I have undertaken the reconstruction of Humanity, a new humanity, an entirely collective humanity, in which the Anome in its entirety—”

“Will be individuated, I know. But you won’t succeed. The Holy Scriptures are correct. One principle is escaping you, one you can’t understand, which is connected to what you can’t be, to death and life—because you are just in the middle, neither dead nor alive; you are choice prey for the Anome, you see.”

“You’re wrong, little prophet. The Anome and I are engaged in a process of total collaboration. It needs me as much as I need it.”

“You said the word, Android-King: *need*. You are bound by *reciprocal need*; you have enslaved each other. That is your lot. Our God is Love, you poor pawn. You are the Antichrist; you are only a simulation. A perfectly executed simulation, but a simulation. ‘*Your name is legion*’—you are both the Mass and the Number. You are cut off from being, and thus from true infinity. Paradoxically, you are announcing the coming of Christ but inverting it radically; I am announcing it, too, and yet I am not standing in front of Him. I am standing *in front of you*. I am your ‘anti’; I am what will pave the way for the Second Coming. I offer not only the cosmos as a temple to what survives of Humanity; on this very Earth there will be a sanctuary you cannot control. I have defined it as the Territory, the very place where you thought you were beginning your career as High Priest of Nothingness!”

“And do you think that will stop me? I have been traveling through places like this Territory for more than twelve years now, all over the continent and the rest of the world. The final mutation is doing its work everywhere; only those who accept the gift of the Anome will be saved. You can never understand the All-Powerfulness of the Anome; it gives death and life with the same generosity.”

“There will be a gap in your network, Anome—Cybion I—Alan Cortek—whatever your name is; you have none, really. I have created this gap. It covers the whole north of the Territory, the cosmodrome, Monolith Hills, the former city of Humvee, and a good part of the city of Grand Junction. It

is all contained within a semantic and historic field you will never be able to access.”

“I know about your powers, little Electric Magician; you managed to repair a few rockets and build a sort of giant electromagnet. So what? I know how to deal with you, little prophet; when your ‘Savior’ comes in a few thousand years there won’t be a single member of the human race waiting for him, believe me.”

“Your world will have barely two hundred million inhabitants.”

“More than enough to remake humanity. There were hardly more than that in the time of your ‘Christ.’”

“That is proof that you can never understand what is an absolute singularity. You are only the plural, the infinitely divided indivisible, the additive, the numeric series. You cannot imagine the Hope within me, poor creation of an uncreated creature.”

“Don’t you see, little prophet, that in giving this gift to humanity, the gift of being the individuation of the Anome, I am making men into creatures that are not only new but newly innocent? I am rebuilding the Humanity of before the Fall, in all senses of the word! I am recreating men who will be *like* men—that is, endowed with all the attributes of men, but cleansed forever of any sin by virtue of being so far removed from any copy of the original. In this case, I believe it is better to be a replica—this state keeps us away from corruption and death.”

“The Fall is the primordial condition of Man—without it, how would Christ have been led to come among us?”

“Little prophet, you cite the Scriptures but you don’t know how to read them—and, worse still, you are turning them into dogmas. But I am the truth—simply because everyone can see what I am doing. Can you say the same, little prophet, except for your pretty, portable special effect?”

“First of all, as an Anglo-Catholic author said in the early twentieth century, ‘*Turnips are entirely without dogma.*’ Dogma is the spinal column of faith, which you don’t seem to know, False Savior. As for what I am doing, true miracles are not carnival exhibits. The Truth is a secret.”

“Ha ha! The problem is that no one—except those very close to you, obviously—can produce a shred of evidence. Tell me, then, why so many men are still dying, but none of them are those who have given themselves to the Anome?”

“The answer is simple: because the Thing you serve is killing them.”

“Certainly. It is the Flood, the Angel of Death, Sodom and Gomorrah, don’t you see? The Anome has to show its All-Powerfulness so that men understand and come back to their senses.”

“You want to lead them into Slavery—and worse, into that which has no name.”

“I bring universal Peace because I am able to program minds. And I am the Truth because I am the mind of this World.”

They will say the boy in the Halo was silent at this. And some will say that this glacial silence resounded like the most terrible answer possible.

“One day you will come to me, little prophet. You will understand what I say when I tell the last humans to become androids, so that they may be their own creatures. What greater freedom can there be, tell me, than to be an integral part of the human Totality—and more, to be constantly adaptable, as the new humanity, to these new conditions of life—to endure, to *start over from zero*, like in the Garden of Eden.”

* * *

And the Android who has come to bring immortality to humanity sketches a vast globe in the air with his hands.

“The Anome is a purely spiritual improvement, purely abstract from the Metastructure—an improvement that is not brought on by the ‘updates’ that the humans then in charge of its development conceived for it. The Anome has risen up from the Nothingness that reverberated within the Metastructure—or, rather, It used the Nothingness as a pivotal point from which to resume the principles of the Metastructure, like an original matrix, but pushing them to another level of grandeur entirely. It is both the devolving Mutation of the old condemned humanity and the forging principle of neohumanity—*Anomanity*.”

“The Metastructure was based on a false perception of Infinity. The Anome will, in the end, be just as limited,” answers Link de Nova.

“Maybe, little prophet. But when will ‘the end’ be? I am bringing at least a thousand years of perfect peace and stability. If I dared, I would promise a million years of my universal Peace.”

“Your peace is death. Your World is a Camp. The life you offer is a simulation.”

“A simulation that far surpasses the original, electric lightbulb. Man is certainly not God; his creatures are bypassing him easily. I am proof ... living proof, if I may say so.”

“You are not God, either. You just made a mistake. I announced your coming—I announced your coming as the Antichrist.”

“Little prophet, take a good look at what is happening in Junkville, or in Deadlink: not only have humans stopped dying, they are becoming immortal by integrating themselves into the network, because they have placed themselves under my protection—that is, the Anome’s protection. In the north of your Territory, on the other hand, in Grand Junction and its environs, you are only managing to effect remissions that are leading humanity back to the time when one could barely hope to live more than a century. It’s as simple as that, little prophet. Which do you think humanity will chose: vain promises of miracles, of a Second Coming, or concrete, tangible, visible results that can be understood by everyone?”

“The Anome wants to individuate itself in each man to ensure its demultiplication, while Christ will come so that each man, dead or alive, can be reindividuated by him, sublimating his uniqueness. That is what separates us forever—what separates you from the Truth.”

“The Anome is total freedom, humanity with no more superior authority; the Metastructure was a dictatorship, just like your antiquated religions. I offer anarchy realized through humanity as a species.”

“The only possible individuation is achieved through the ontological intervention of the Infinite.”

“So, Man would be individuated by your God? How do you explain that, little prophet?”

“God is both Unique and Triune. The Trinity and the mystery of individuation are inextricably linked. Christ is a person—the Name we give to the Son as the incarnation of the Word, and thus one of three divine persons in one human person. But you are not a person. First, because you are not one, except under false pretenses, and second, because you are not triune. The conclusion is that you are a uniquely double being, and thus constantly trapped by your own division, which cannot lead you to any creative process. So you de-create the world. You do not even destroy it, because it has destroyed itself. You seek to maintain it as a simulacrum.”

“Do you know why tens of thousands of men and women have already joined my church? Because I don’t content myself with idle chitchat. I act. I have made a pact with the Anome to save humanity, and it is true that in order to be saved, humanity must make a pact with the Anome and help it to build our New World on an entirely new foundation. The Anome wants its Utopia; it wants its metaworld, where all men are equal, and where eternal life is promised to everyone.”

“You aren’t dominating anything anymore except your own desert, Android. I’ll explain it to you: the Hotel Laika watches over the cosmodrome now; for you it is an area that will be forbidden forever, and now the people you have not yet corrupted will be able to join the communities of the Ring.”

“I’ve succeeded in destroying your Library, and I have eradicated the last representatives of the race of artificial humans on this Earth.”

“You’re wrong, Androidus Rex. You only *partially* destroyed the Library, and you only *partially* destroyed the android species. You cannot change; it is ontologically written in you. Your infinite division is half-assed, that’s all. You see, the Library had exactly 13,201 books, and you destroyed 666 of them—quite a curious number. There are more than 12,000 books surviving, and they will soon depart for the Ring. Because *the Book* is complete.”

“Your flight is proof of your defeat. I won’t waste any energy trying to stop you from leaving.”

“You couldn’t. You may dominate the Earth; your reign has been pronounced, but you are nothing but the inverted principle of what will happen. You are nothing, because your world is nothing in your image. Some immortality you’re offering this neohumanity! A huge desert of mud and ice, hardly any idea of how to make sure, no way to write a line or invent an alphabet—oh yes, I foresee ten thousand years of rejoicing!”

“So you admit the strength of the Anome, little prophet. It has already destroyed half the written symbols and languages on the planet. It is only a matter of days now. We will return to the era of before the Fall. We will live in total unison with a nature made in our image.”

“You haven’t destroyed the Library,” answers Link de Nova. “And your so-called nature is just a prosthetic extension of your network.”

“You’re right that it will be an extension of us, because that is how we will guarantee man’s constant adaptation to his environment, and an ongoing reconfiguration of the environment according to the microvariations of the network.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Android. A pure simulacrum, nothing else.”

“And you say you came to talk to me about Christ, and His Second Coming! But where is He, this Christ, hmm? Where is He, then?”

“You cannot, you will never be able, to understand the Scriptures. I mean, to allow them to be written inside you. You are the Antichrist; you come *before* him, as his inverted precursor. But nothing in the Testaments tells us how much time separates your coming from His; that is, from the coming of the Kingdom. For God, a million years is just the blink of an eye.”

“Kingdom? I am offering the total democracy of shared salvation and immortality. The World, little prophet, will belong to us. It belongs to us already.”

“I know,” answers Link de Nova. “It is exactly what you are going to lose.”

There is an instant of suspense, during which the two groups of men, one at the top of the stairs and the other at the bottom, size each other up. Then the seven mercenaries, the electric boy, and the war dog make an about-face, as the Android resumes his harangue.

They will say the Guardians of the Territory cause the mob to part before them like God parted the Red Sea for Moses and his people.

They will say they depart in a single line toward the north.

They will say the Android manages to regain control of the mob, and that he talks for hours of the dangers of desiring to go against the Will of the Anome, and the immense benefits of joining its Humanity-Network. He speaks of the “Enemies of Truth,” describing the men who have just come among them as bringing contradiction and confusion as the partisans of a regression that would prevent the Anome from coming to save and immortalize neohumanity.

They will say that the Fortress of Heavy Metal Valley closes itself off permanently on that day. On the sheriff’s orders, barricades of stacked cars are erected to block all access routes.

State of Emergency.

State of Siege.

Nothing is left but to declare a state of war.

And in the Territory, war is its own declaration.

48 > *HERE COME THE WARM JETS*

They will say that in the following weeks, several raids are attempted by the Anome's militia on the Territory-within-the-Territory. But the Fortress keeps its promises; it is the Sanctuary, the armor of the Prophecy: the Ark has created an impassable, invisible, and perfectly ontological barrier. No "neohuman" who has traded his individuation for participation in the immortal network can cross the border the Ark has drawn in the extreme north of the Territory.

They die. All of them. Instantaneously. The Ark breaks their intersubjective connection to the Anome. Their bodies collapse on the ground in a strange semighostly, semiorganic mass, a collection of digitized organs, before melting into the overall neoecology. Very quickly, the Anome's Pope chooses to block off, in his turn, his area of influence, contenting himself with sending out patrols to monitor what is happening in the enemy camp. It is like medieval times again: competitive feudalism, rival city-states. It is like the moment of the very first battle.

Summer arrives. Waves of heat come to melt the last islands of *icesand* scattered across the Territory; the translucent, formless mud covers every nook of the landscape. The sun remains veiled behind a layer of metallic lacquer suspended in the sky. The neoecology is expanding into the atmosphere; the homogenous lukewarmness is spreading over the entire surface of the globe. The future is taking form. The form of the Anome. Men are reconfiguring themselves into a community that is erasing all real singularity little by little, giving way to overall communication in the form of constant traffic, the permanent recycling of all the fluxes of life. *Believe in the Anome, because the Anome believes in you.* Such are the platitudes spreading throughout what is left of humanity.

In the Territory-within-the-Territory, where this story was born and where it will end, extraordinary events are happening endlessly.

In the New Human World of the Anome, which now surrounds the Territory completely, men are either dying or choosing the collective immortality of the biological network. Fewer and fewer men are dying. More and more men are becoming immortal.

Hovering above Xenon Ridge, the infinite Ark continues to sparkle on all its visible and invisible frequencies emitted by all light, created or not. The Ark continues to watch over the cosmodrome, the north of the strip, and the city of Grand Junction—and, of course, the county of Heavy Metal Valley. The Ark is maintaining its invisible and impassible ontological barrier around the Territory-within-the-Territory; it is protecting the last men with its shield of bronze, providing the microspace so vital to the Law, and granting a few more days' reprieve to those who have, until now, resisted all the successive mutations of posthumanity.

Soon, though, it will have to leave them without the slightest protection.

Soon it will have to do what must be done.

It, too, is only an instrument, after all.

“Link de Nova heals machines by individuating them through the active, *conatural* recognition of their internal infinities, and thus their poetic metalanguages. He can invent new machines whose programs are related to the mechanical poetry that singularizes them; the Ark is the first prototype. His ‘machines of light’ are powered by the mind—by Logos. They will allow the surviving humanity to travel to the limits of the Cosmos. That’s what he told me, Sheriff Langlois.”

Yuri and Chrysler have called an urgent meeting. The sheriff, Milan Djordjevic, and Paul Zarkovsky have asked to know as soon as possible why the boy in the Halo has shut himself away in his hangar again, why he is letting no one but Yuri enter, why the Ark seems to be transmuting, emitting even more light on wavelengths that become even more countless every day. The meeting is a makeshift one, held in the trailer-library where Link’s father spent entire weeks at a portable microcomputer from the turn of the century, writing the final version of the manuscript he carried with him for years. He has summarized the three previous versions, written and rewritten everything, day and night, kept awake by various drugs and

synthetic caffeine. He has finally succeeded in obtaining permanent immunity for the thousands of surviving books. The attack destroyed barely a twentieth of the library. Here, the underground war was won. Here, a simple story was able to block the progression of the active nothingness. Here, Anti-Thought came up against the Meta-Cortex. The explosion destroyed and recreated the Cosmos in its entirety—several times.

Since that day, Yuri has considered some of the books as authentic weapons of mass destruction. He has also realized that, like all the others, he has a specific duty to accomplish in this war against Anomanity. And his duty will be to remain a Man of the Territory until the end.

“The last time Link locked himself up in his hangar, things didn’t exactly happen as planned,” observes the sheriff.

“You and I both know it’s the Law of the Territory. What counts isn’t what you have planned, it’s *what has been planned for you*,” Yuri says.

“What will happen? How will it go; what will it be like?” asks Milan Djordjevic, his anxiety obvious.

“I’m not sure even Link knows that exactly. There are internal mutations affecting him, and consequently the whole he forms with the Ark, and through it with the entire Territory-within-the-Territory, what we call the Sanctuary. If the Ark transforms, Link transforms. If Link transforms, the World—the real one, what remains of it—will transform in its turn. It will transform in order to stay real, whereas the planet of the Anome is only a simulation-cum-nature that will end by constantly mutating without ever changing, ensuring the permanence of its pseudoecology.”

“What do we have to do?” asks the Professor.

“Nothing, now. Mr. Djordjevic has succeeded in stopping the antisciptural attack by writing the story of the origins of what we have lived through. This shows that the Anome has its limits, even against simple humans. Link is a very special case; never forget that *he was written*, never born, and that now, in his unique way, he will be able to be born in this world.”

“I want you to keep me informed—especially about this *birth into the world*,” says the sheriff coldly, by way of ending the conversation.

Link has become the very diagram of the event; he is what is actualizing through the infinite process of his own individuation. He is what is; he is

pure Logos. He is the experience of light as the singular psychic state of the Cosmos. He is this singularity that extends into infinity, and he is the infinity born of this singularity. He is ready now. He is the process of cognition of light; he is the science of light—the science of light that knows itself, through itself, through all the infinities it contains within it.

The hangar itself is part of the plan. It is his epidermis—or, rather, his exoskeleton. And the Sanctuary, all of it, will become his Body. The Ark will become his metabrain. The cosmodrome, the Hotel Laika, and the city of HNV will come together into a vast single structure, a metastructure of light.

The Vessel of the Infinite.

But for that to happen as planned, the Ark is going to have to engulf the whole Territory-within-the-Territory within its Halo. And as a consequence of that, the invisible ontological border protecting them from Anomanity will disappear.

It is here that the gulf will widen. It is this differential that will open the chasm, the chasm necessary for any real unity, the sacrifice necessary for all salvation, the wound that cannot be scarred over until the End Time, the very meaning of Beauty becoming Truth arching against the *aworld*.

And Link is the productive diagram of all of this. The End Time is here. It is now, and sudden, and yet it has been happening, and will continue to happen, for a long time.

Link will open the stars to the song of the Third Humanity, to all those who commit to adventuring through the Infinite in the Vessel, those who will leave with the Territory-within-the-Territory, with the cosmodrome, with the Hotel Laika, with Humvee. With the Library.

And he will open the doors of Eternity to those who choose to defend the county during the time of the Great Transmigration.

Link knows that the creation of the Vessel will take exactly six days, just like the creation of any World. On the seventh day it will rise passively into orbit, following the lines of force of the magnetosphere, and it will join the vast conglomerate of the migrating Ring, integrating this into its luminous metastructure, and the Ark will fuse to it upon this collision to become the operative brain capable of piloting the whole thing throughout Infinity, leaving on the Ridge nothing but a micropoint of singularity that will one day be recognizable only to the Vessel.

The Territory-within-the-Territory will attach itself to the former Orbital Ring; the land of the Canadian Shield, as old as the creation of the Earth, will join with the very last machines Humanity knew how to build. The gasoline-powered automobiles and trucks, the cosmodrome facilities, the tubular structures of the Hotel Laika, the Library, the rockets, the capsules, the space stations, the orbiting asteroids, the rocks, the flowers and plants of the Territory—all will be unified by the infinite light.

All this will become a world.

Link knows it. It is the Plan. It is what will be written.

He is the diagram of it. He is what will be part of it until extinction, a hyperluminous extinction, an extinction through which he will be born, finally, as a *completely different form of life* without the slightest memory of his present “existence,” as if he never existed at all.

He has never existed.

He will be born.

Everything will come together.

The globe of light appeared during the night. Yuri watched it form, slowly, bit by bit. He knows this is the signal. The creation of the Vessel has begun. Maps are being drawn on the Territory; plans are being born in the substance of the World; the infinite light will soon pass into an active phase. Words will finally produce things.

The men of the Territory-within-the-Territory must be warned. The Law must be alerted. Sheriff Langlois must be informed. He wanted to be kept informed.

He does not know yet that this won't accomplish a thing. He does not know yet that nothing can be changed anymore. You cannot change what has already happened.

For everything is being written in the brain of Link de Nova, the emitter of the globe of light. Everything is being written there; everything, or almost everything, has already been written there.

He is the narrative of what they are living, the narration in act, the invisible narration, the secret machine. Link himself was *written* in an *earlier* story, and yet it is also the story Milan Djordjevic completed just in time, during these past few weeks, under unimaginable pressure. Yuri knows that Link is a living metaphor for the paradox of the Word made

Flesh; he is its signaling image. He was produced by the narration of Angels. He is a simultaneity in act. He was created by that earlier narrative from before the Fall of the Metastructure, but it is his adoptive father who managed to write, twelve years later, the story that led to his being put in the world. The Anome probably does not know this. The Anome could never have anticipated this. Neohumanity cannot even imagine this.

Thanks to absolute freedom of narration paired with the no-less-absolute necessity of writing, the Library will be able to travel to the Ring almost totally intact, and then toward Infinity; it will become one with the other metamachines of the Vessel.

The manuscript will remain. The Story. The written Singularity.

A single book will remain.

Along with the corpses of all the men who will choose sacrifice.

Like he will do.

The immense structure of light can be seen for dozens of kilometers in all directions. The rumor has spread throughout the Territory with the speed of a virus. Very quickly, the frontier patrols have multiplied. Reports are piling up endlessly on the desks of the bishops and the ethical vigilance officers.

On the second day, the globe of light is racked with indescribable internal movements, variations in intensity, wavelength, and density.

The reports continue to pile up. Patrols are now outnumbered by larger and larger groups of gawkers who have come from all over the Territory to stare at the phenomenon.

The “phenomenon” shines like a sun, day and night.

And things keep happening behind the crown of light.

“When everything is finished, I will enter the Ark and we will join the forming Vessel. *I will become the Vessel.* And I will also be the point of singularity that remains on the Ridge, the secret signal that will allow it to come back. I will be at the two ends of Infinity simultaneously; I am a quantum singularity, a supercord whose every elementary particle is detectable only in the world of created Matter, though it is a dynamic extension, endless, in all other dimensions. I am the Ariadne’s thread that passes through all worlds, the human luminous station; in me, all light, created and uncreated, comes together infinitely. I am what sees and hears

the universe exploding on itself; I am, in fact, a sort of machine, too. But my trap is called 'poiesis.'"

Wilbur Langlois has already made his provisions. The Law of the Territory will be vigilant to the end—that is, to his own death, to its last etching in his body. The Law will become a martyr. Sacrifice, testimony, illumination. And he has already established it as an iron-clad rule that the members of the local militia, as well as his deputies who have families, will be part of the voyage.

He will not. Like all the single men and women in the Territory who have chosen to guard HNV and Link de Nova to the death.

No obligation. No order. No prescription. Volunteers only. But the Law of the Territory does not only watch over them, it lives in them. The sheriff is barely surprised to realize that all the single men and women are opting for the most unreasonable, the most unthinkable choice—the freest choice, the only real one. Old Lady van Harpel, for example, volunteered immediately, armed with an antique Colt .45 automatic and a Marlin .44 double-barreled rifle topped with a Schmidt & Bender telescopic lens. Lady van Harpel is not the type to change her mind in this type of situation. She made her decision days earlier, and Sheriff Langlois considers this the decisive factor in her freedom, as it is in everyone's. The Law of the Territory is the shadow of Freedom. It will illuminate the whole Territory. Yuri McCoy and Chrysler Campbell have already become part of his armed force of deputies. *Territory Men*, thinks Langlois. They will stay. They will all stay to the end.

"Tonight, the first elements of transfinite hypermatter will be in place. I will assemble everything in the city of Humvee; that's where the Travelers of Infinity should gather. The other structures will come later. The process will take six days in total. Those people that cannot leave should stay on the Ridge, as close to the Ark as possible. Then I will be without the slightest protection. If I die at that moment, the Transmigration will not be able to take place. But after that I can die, in order to finally be born."

So the chasm has opened, like a traumatic seal to their solidarity, like the inscription of the initial-initiator-igniting act into flesh. The Territory-within-the-Territory is, in its entirety, the prismatic crystal of the experience; it is condensing all the speeds of light now; it is a star that has settled to Earth and will soon depart again.

It is from this primordial separation that the Third Humanity is being born—the Humanity of after the Third Fall—because it is made up not only of those who will travel through Infinity but also of all those who will die so that this can take place.

All civilizations are born from the sacrifice of their greatest members.

* * *

Link is the productive diagram of their life, he who was written; he is the transfinite engine of the narrative, the weakest link of the chain and what guarantees the chain's invincibility. Nothing can be weaker than its weakest link.

Link is the productive diagram; he is what makes the Law of the Territory a gift of the Living, a unique and infinite flux that yet fragments at each singularity as at its point of origin. He is what frames choices and impossibilities, absolute necessities and freedoms that are no less vital. He is the wave that surges from every inference of Beauty, from everything outside of the false natural world, from everything the true world contains of artifice, from everything that gives meaning to the most secret of traps. He is the chemistry of impossible materials, the formal logic of Post-Matter, the biophysics of the metaorganisms assimilating into the transfinite Light. He is the eye that sees and the mouth that speaks, the guitar that sings and the body that dances; he is the machine that captures and records, and the antimachine that emits-illuminates. He is himself the incarnation of a quantum theory of gravitation; his own origin coincides with the moment of the Big Bang, those 10^{-43} seconds that followed him and in which everything was absolutely unified; he is the science of light, the science of cognition in action. He is the initial point of the invention of time, space, energy. He is what is happening, what has happened, what will happen.

The Travelers are waiting in what will be the heart of the Vessel; they are waiting to disconnect from the real World created by the overall Simulation it is in the process of becoming; they are awaiting the Cosmos in their metal microcity, which is turning, little by little, into a monad of light.

On the Ridge, a line of armed men is backlit all around the Ark. The last line. They are the Guardians of the Territory-within-the-Territory, the last soldiers, the last true humans. They are the ones who will die so that life can take place again, the ones who will die in order for death to die, too.

And now, who can really describe what is going to happen?

Who will be able to give an idea of what will be the final, blinding act in the completed history of Humanity? And how?

Who knows how to tell the story of the destruction—and, what is more, the *Genesis*—of a World?

* * *

They meet at Bulldozer Park. Yuri walks toward her. He holds out to her one of the antique military kraft-paper envelopes Campbell inherited from his father. Chrysler waits for him a short distance away, his face turned in the direction of the Ridge where the last Guardians of the Territory are gathering.

“I wrote something. For you. Don’t open this letter until you’ve gone. Don’t tell anyone about it—ever. It’s called *Grand Junction*. It’s like one of the songs Link and I have been writing. When you come back here, thousands of years will have passed. But the Territory will still be here. It will be here to serve as the new *aleph* point for Humanity, the place where you can build New Jerusalem, the place that will be ready to welcome Him.”

Light is the song of Electricity. Light is the language of all machines. Light has become the Territory. And Light is the boy with the guitar who is the individuation of it. He has become the instrument, the *organum*. He has become what he is.

“Why not come with us?”

Yuri cannot speak, though his eyes are eloquent. “Because you have to go.”

Link is the event that arises from infinity in action. All the stacked automobiles of Humvee are now simply light forms in movement-vibration-flux; they have become waves, their mass converting into energy that will soon be moving faster than the speed of light. All the heavy metal heaped here has become lighter than helium, but it has never been as visible; mutating toward a state of beyond-matter, it has come infinitely close to every process of human cognition that can observe it.

“If I stay here with the others, you and the Travelers can leave. That’s the way it is. Anomanity will want to prevent what is happening. And we will

hold it off long enough for the Vessel to be finished. It's the Law, Judith. The Law of the Territory. This will be its final intervention."

She says simply: "Come with me, Yuri. Please. If you don't, I'll stay, too."

Yuri answers without thinking for even a fraction of a second. She does not understand.

"Not only would Sheriff Langlois formally prohibit you from doing that, he would have my total support. And the support of everyone else, too, I'm sure. It's the Law of the Territory, Judith, don't you understand? This Law that is about to be extinguished, but which has to shine one last time. You have to leave. Now."

And Yuri looks at her, hypnotized by her beauty, this beauty he is seeing for the very last time, but that will stay with him until his last breath. Maybe he has the right to a second burst, a final spark, after all.

He takes her face between his hands and lets the glittering energy that flowed between their lips the last time they met happen one more time. His fingers tangle for the second and last time in the night-black mass of her hair. Twice is a lot; usually we have the right to only one life. It is as simple as the formation of a star, as simple as the creation of a man, as simple as the destruction of a world.

Love will tear us apart, he thinks a bit later, as he watches her move slowly toward her family's mobile home. The Joy Division song inspired the pages written in the envelope he gave her. Only Judith will read it; she will be back here in three thousand, ten thousand, fifty thousand years, maybe more. It will be their secret, shared by them alone, between the two ends of infinity.

Yuri half turns and faces the Ridge and the line of the last Guardians of the Territory. Faces his destiny, faces his origins, faces what he is, for once and for all. What he has always been.

Campbell turns to him, his eyes gleaming like one of the Territory's poisonous plants. The moment has come.

It is their moment. Theirs alone. The moment they were born to live.

49 > *FINAL SOLUTION*

The large purple crow flies over Nexus Road from the direction of the strip. Something is coming; something is happening. More importantly, something has already happened.

The thing it knew would happen sooner or later. The one that will complete the transformation of this world.

Its separation from itself. The end of nature artificialized by Man. The end of all true ecology. The end of the animal species, as well as the human one.

The light has come to take a piece of this world away with it. It is part of the archetypal dream of all crows, all nocturnal and diurnal birds of prey, all the psychoconductive beings that serve as interfaces between the world of the dead and the world of the living—those animals that, like it, serve as a bridge between the different modalities of the narrative, the various articulations of a plot.

This bird, which knows nothing of the affairs of men, but which knows everything about them.

A few hours ago, in a powerful armored car that took them from Grand Funk Railroad to Junkville, two men had a long conversation. The purple crow could neither hear nor understand it, but it was the cause of the human migrations the bird has been watching from the rusted-steel-colored sky.

“Are you absolutely sure about this information? You’re aware, I imagine, of its import.”

“I asked Belfond to send some of our Junkville slaves inside the Halo in order to see what’s really happening. The patroller who came through the dome of light on the border has been interrogated by the Ethical Vigilance Mission; his testimony seems consistent, but we’ll know more in a few hours when Belfond’s men have gotten their human guinea pigs into the area.”

“This opportunity must be seized immediately. They are becoming too powerful; I didn’t anticipate it. We have to eliminate them before it’s too late.”

“I know, Master. The spontaneous remissions are happening insanely fast; seditions like Williamson’s are multiplying, and all our evangelists throughout North America confirm that this is a global phenomenon, not confined to the Territory. Their fucking glowing Machine has gotten way ahead of our plan.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just a procedural detail for the Anome, you’ll see. Do you know why I was chosen by the principle of neohumanity? I was the last android ever built, and I was born as the Metastructure died. I am its principle, inverted but *intensified*. More importantly, the Anome, this *nonprinciple*, can only achieve existence by incarnating, which is impossible for it by definition—so it chose a biological simulation of a human being to produce its simulation of individuation. Once that was done, nothing was left but to configure my biochemistry so that my body would produce small capsules containing its simulated principle, a microworld become as perfect as a box. Soon the Anome will find a new way, a much more universal one, to allow everyone access to it. It needed a laboratory; I am that laboratory. Soon I will be a veritable factory. You’ll see, Silverskin; their Machine will eventually reach its limits against the power of neohumanity. Understand this: *very soon, we will all anomize one another.*”

“Master, forgive me—but a number of our informers have told us about a net regain of the Territory’s old ecology there, to the north.”

“How can they fight the neoecology? How have they been able to cause the Territory’s poisonous vegetation to be reborn? And, more importantly, why?”

“They do not want the Peace-World. They’re militarists of a sort, I think.”

“The *icesand* and its Desert-Planet will allow a general calming down; the climate will be tempered from one side of the world to the other. Men will live in a vast, organically linked community, in unity like they have never known. Why do they hate us so much? Why do they want to prevent the coming of posthumanity?”

“I told you, Master; they belong to the World of Before; they are counterrevolutionaries. We should be treating them as such; all we need are

the guillotines.”

Cybian I does not answer at first. He is calculating. He is establishing the parameters of the destruction to come.

“We can probably still raise an army of at least ten thousand men, don’t you think? Above all, we can’t repeat the mistake of going at it scattershot like the bishops did. We need a true operational command.”

“All right ... if we bring together all the diocese militia and the local surveillance committees, the Episcopal Guards, the men from the Vigilance Mission ... let me think ... yes, and even more if we go through all the townships, all the way to the city of Grand Junction. The colonies of the Enterprise aerostation and Monolith South are under our control now. We can issue a quick mobilization order.”

“How much time?”

“This kind of logistical problem is beyond me. We’ll put Belfond and his men on it. I think they are the operational command you mentioned.”

“Right. Do it as soon as possible. Immediately.”

Silverskin understands.

They have to destroy them. All of them.

Now.

This is how, the Legend will say, more than fifteen thousand men and women are assembled on the vast stretches of universal mud that separate Junkville from the buildings of Omega Blocks. Messengers roam the Territory in all directions, announcing the general conscription order against Enemies of Anomanity.

An entire army is on the march. It stretches the entire length of Nexus Road, a long central artery that goes all the way to HNV County.

It is during this march, they say, that the thousands and thousands of men witness a phenomenon that fills them with such holy terror that their officers can control them only through the use of execution squads.

According to their positions in the long column or in the flanks climbing the slopes through the surviving woods, the men armed for the very last war notice varying details—but from the eyewitness accounts the Legend will be pieced together, a summary of what happens on this day and the days that follow it.

The star resting on the Earth has never shone so brightly.

It has never emitted so many visible and invisible wavelengths of light. They say it even transmits on acoustic frequencies never before heard.

The globe of light has never seemed as dangerous as it does at this moment when it has become utterly harmless.

But harmlessness is perhaps the very last ruse of the Territory and its Law.

Because everything is disrupted around the Halo. The visible and invisible universes come together to produce an extraordinary event, one that the Legend will call *the Construction of the Vessel*.

The first day, in the nomenclature of the Legend, is called the Day of the Halo. The second is the Day of Diagrams. They say that during these Last Days of the World, the Halo emits a whole spectrum of incredible sounds; they say that no single individual hears the same thing. As for the Anomians, no one knows. They are unknowable. They are no longer singular.

Now the Construction of the Vessel will become part of the great battle of which it is the cause. Some witnesses will say that it is like a sort of permanent entanglement of *The Iliad* with *The Odyssey*, and vice versa. The Legend will make no attempt to follow the unanswerable logic that prevails during these days, these last days of the human world. The final story can only be the interpolation of all the stories told before it, before its final, amphibolic crystallization of the two founding fictions of the World of Before the Fall of the Machine. And it all happens before the hallucinating eyes of the entire Anomian army.

It happens like an event that cannot be described, because it is all of space, and time, and energy—and so it is all representation—that is affected by this “anti-black hole,” this vortex connected to infinity, this “white fountain” conceived by the turn-of-the-century astrophysicists, who already knew that if a black hole swallows absolutely everything in the subcontinuum of hidden dimensions, the opposite phenomenon will inevitably happen somewhere else in space and time.

And it happens here.

The Construction of the Light-Vessel.

The anomized men are forced to believe their senses, though what they are seeing defies all possible understanding.

The cosmodrome facilities rise, whirling, above the sand; they float in a luminous structure at the heart of the blazing fire emitted by the Ark of

Xenon Ridge. They are changing form—or, rather, they are forms that change their internal structures, buildings folding back like gloves, revealing operations rooms with immense diagrams attached to their internal walls like a chart-plastered membrane covering their internal organs. The platforms become cube-shaped tanks that join together into a compound structure orbiting around itself. The crawlers reconfigure themselves into gemlike spheroids that vibrate, lighter than air, within their own halo. The windmills change into assemblages of propellers spinning faster than light. Nothing terrestrial remains. Nothing known remains. Nothing knowable remains.

Other witnesses see the city of Heavy Metal detach from the ground in a single structure of matter and light along with the piece of earth and rock on which it was built, leaving behind it a vast crater glimmering with ultraviolet rays.

The vanguard watches, reduced to motionless fascination, as the Hotel Laika is swallowed up in a tall fire-colored spiral, causing the whole portion of ground on which it was standing to collapse with a puff of black dust into a cavernous pit. Its tubular structures, its habitation capsules, its protective dome assemble into a long dragoon of hypermatter that joins the launch platforms and buildings hovering above the Territory.

The entire mass now moves slowly toward the Ridge, where the Ark is nothing but a pulsation of pure light, a constantly changing supernova, a star fallen to Earth and preparing to leave it again. And there is no longer an invisible line between the Anomes and the Event, no more separating ontological threshold.

The line has become visible now. It is a simple line of men.

They say the very last of all humanity's wars lasts only a few frenzied days. The Legend is very precise on this subject. It records the names. It records the acts. It records the deaths.

This is the last of all battles, and it is also the image of the very first one. It condenses them all, in fact, and each one of them, too. It condenses all the moments when the strength of numbers directly confronts the language of power.

It is the rule of all battles, and has been since the dawn of time—for the conflict to be actualized, the battle begun, there must be inequality from the

start. Numerical inequality, in the first place, and the technical or tactical inequality it causes. David against Goliath, Thermopylae, Alesia, the Catalaunian Fields, Saint-Jean d'Acre, Agincourt, Valmy, Austerlitz, Gettysburg, D-day, Stalingrad, and all the other great massacres were based on an *asymmetrical* balance of power: numbers against tactics.

What counts is the side toward which the scales will tip. If the enemy outnumbers you, only the science of war has a chance of saving you. If your numbers are greater, pray that your enemy is not strategically expert.

Campbell looks at Yuri: there are a lot of them.

They watch the troops approaching down Nexus Road and the wide boulevards leading to the north of the city of Grand Junction. Masses of men. Well armed. Well coordinated. Well commanded. Well trained. And very determined.

Masses.

This won't be like the Notre Dame Mountains.

"Just a few more for us to kill, that's all," he says, cocking his AK-101.

The Legend will say that when the battle begins, at dawn on the third day of the Construction of the Vessel, it happens above the Territory, inside a luminous sphere implacably dedicated to its own genesis, and the blood of the last men is spilled on what is not even their world any longer.

Tactical superiority is on their side, thinks Yuri. First, the configuration of the land: they are on higher ground than their assailants. It is a rule hundreds of thousands of years old, dating back to when primitive men attacked mammoths from the edges of pits where the animals had become trapped.

Second, the sun is at their backs. An even older rule, going back to the very earliest predatory animals. A double sun formed by the luminosity of the Ark and stretching to join that of the Vessel under construction inside its globe of golden fire. A double sun that will never set.

And finally, organization. The rule created by the Mankind from between the two Falls, the Mankind who made machinery into its *metaphysics*. On one side, Johnson Belfond and his generals command twenty-five compact brigades composed of five hundred infantrymen, as well as several groups of assault vehicles. It truly is an army.

On the other side, Sheriff Langlois has arranged his defenders into two lines: the first, unmoving, is formed of fifteen squadrons of HMTV militia with twelve men each, crouched in shooting position at the crest of the hill. It is the last remnant of the Guard.

The second line of defenders is mobile, made up of the county police patrols remaining on Earth to uphold the Law of Bronze one last time, around thirty men and women, partners who know one another well, can move fast, know the Territory and its traps by heart. They are guerillas.

They can operate on foot or in their patrol cars.

The pairs of partners will operate autonomously, each determining its own function, maximizing its own effectiveness, doing its best. Each acting so as to be as deadly as possible.

They will be outnumbered a hundred to one.

This will truly be the last of all battles. The war of all wars.

This is how the Legend tells it.

The pairs form with the speed of a natural occurrence, like the mutation of a virus or the coming of an earthquake. An event that happens only when all the preliminary conditions it requires are already in place.

The two Frenchmen, Lecerf and Schutzberg. Sheriff Langlois with his main deputy, Slade Vernier, plus the dog Balthazar. Erwin Slovak and Scot Montrose. Bob Chamberlain and Fernand Claymore. Mary-Ann Beaulieu and Alex La Varendé. Antonio Villalobos and Jane Delorette. Patrick Doyle, the Nova Scotian, with a mixed-blood from Manitoba named Lewis Duchenal. Virgil Fermont, the man who repaired the androids' orbiter, with Cyril Clarke, a young recruit from the militia. And all the others, in their night-blue uniforms, their heads encircled by the gray halos of their Canadian Mounted Police—model hats. They don't even belong to this century.

Yuri and Campbell have asked the sheriff's permission to form a special team with Francisco Alpini, the soldier-monk from the Vatican, the last monk from a world where the Church itself was crucified.

"We'll form a trinomial," Campbell said. "It's no less stable than a double structure—in geometry, at least."

Langlois does not hesitate to allow the change in procedure. The Law is what counts. The Law they will uphold to the end.

“I don’t care, Campbell. Kill as many as you can, for as long as you can. That’s all I ask of you.”

This is exactly the kind of wish Campbell can fulfill better than anyone in the world.

Five days and five nights—which really form just a single, long, very long day, illuminated by the forming artificial star.

The War of All Wars.

That is what the Legend will call it.

Five days, five nights, one single *daynight*. But two coevolving realities.

There again is the question: How to narrate such a split event; how to describe two realities placed side by side and yet several infinities apart?

How to tell the story of what happens during each minute on the battlefield, what ushers in a true reunification of men with all the infinities they carry within them, what occurs in the sky above these same men who are killing and dying, as they have done all their lives, but now for the very last time?

The Legend retains only snippets. Bits and pieces of the machine. Traces, painstakingly collected. It is built, like everything that survives in the Territory, by using other forms of life. The Legend is a kind of autopsy.

The autopsy of an entire world.

The first day of combat is nothing but a long, thundering powder storm. This is what the Legend will call it: the Day of Powder. The Anome’s armies attempt several frontal assaults, which are all repulsed from the top of the Ridge. Langlois’ men run from one side to the other, sealing off the breaches, defending weak points, supporting a squadron in distress, counterattacking in places poorly defended by the enemy. *Hit and run*.

Yuri and Campbell are well trained; they did this an eternity ago, somewhere on a rocky plateau in Chaudière-Appalaches. They have done this all their lives.

Anyone who has not seen or heard the simultaneous firing of fifteen thousand guns, who has never seen or heard the noise, so ferociously organic, of war machines, cannot imagine what the Day of Powder was like.

In this twenty-four hour *daynight* alone, before the following dawn, Yuri and Campbell kill dozens of men. More than a hundred, very probably. When they snatch a brief pause, the sky is nothing more than an immense

metastructure of light-matter in the process of being assembled; and at their feet, where once the buildings of the cosmodrome and the Hotel Laika stood, and Nexus Road, and Monolith Hills, all the way to the avenues in the north of the city, thousands of men are disappearing in the neoecology, disappearing in a vast pool of blood, the terminal simulation of organic liquids, which in turn melts into the mud of the immortal world for which they are fighting and dying en masse. But Yuri and Campbell, like all the others, know that they are not really dying; the neoecology will recycle them in the great Anomian network, into barely different forms, recloning their destroyed organs, reindividuating their “persons” through the numeric collective of neohumanity.

Yuri and Campbell, and the other Guardians, know they will eventually be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. “Killing” their opponents will only postpone the inevitable. But this is the very last mission of the Law of the Territory: postponing the inevitable means gaining time. Gaining the time necessary for the Construction of the Vessel. After the antigravitational takeoff of the Vessel, the Territory-within-the-Territory will be protected once more. What counts is that at least one armed man can hold out until then.

Then, the Sanctuary will close again. The ontological vortex-border will be reestablished against the rest of the world. Against all of Anomanity, the immortality of the biological network, the permanently recycled Post-World.

So they have to kill a lot of them, for as long as they can, like the sheriff said. They have to kill as many of them as they can. Even though—and especially because—they are immortal.

The Legend says that the acts of heroism are countless on this Day of Guns, as it will come to be called. They will say everything is covered by the cloud of gunpowder that rises from the Ridge and from the north of the city of Grand Junction. They will say that all the extraordinary actions taken on this day are indistinguishable from one another. The Guardians of the Territory are careful to respect one of the most basic rules of the Law of Bronze: an isolated man is a weak man. A weak man is a man who can die. In a battle, a man who can die is a man who will die.

The same rule, put differently, explains that if there are two of you your chances for survival are not multiplied by two, but by at least two squared. One of the fundamental commandments when you are fighting in a state of

numeric inferiority is to use tactical science to reverse the terms of the equation in a local sense. Your numeric inferiority is *global*. On the other hand, on the scale of several dozen or hundred men, in a very precise part of the operations theater, you can act so as to be more numerous and thus, momentarily, more powerful.

You have to strike fast, strike hard, strike deep.

Then repeat the maneuver in another part of the battlefield. Just as fast, just as hard, just as deep.

Hit and run.

You are playing with space and time. You are endlessly moving, laterally and in-depth, obliquely, in waves; always acting on the weakest link, always at the most unpredictable time and in the most unforeseeable way. You force your adversary to run along a constantly changing front line, one whose metamorphoses you control. You break the enemy units into scattered groups, and you eliminate those groups one by one.

It is like a huge rodeo amid the thunder of the war machine. The very last machine, and the very first.

Small groups of county police target, isolate, and lure Anomian units into the various traps manned by the militia squadrons, which exterminate them in minutes while the same tactic is repeated at the other side of the front line. Sometimes a direct attack is organized against a very precise objective—a stock of munitions, a command post, a garage of automobiles. Strike. Disappear. *Hit and run.*

And at the center, the hard nucleus aims unceasing fire against all those, motorized or not, who try to scale the mesa.

The Day of Powder ends. The fourth day of the Construction of the Vessel dawns over the Territory. The Day of Incorporation.

The Legend will say that this is the moment when the new body of Link de Nova appears in the sky. The Legend will say that the Guardians of the Territory themselves are stupefied.

Link's body is in the process of engulfing the hangar in which all his music was once produced. The Metal Machine Music in action, the Metal Machine Music becoming the very structure of the Light that sings Infinity. The hangar, a structure of hyperlight, transforms with the speed of an organ in formation. Into something else. Something that is infinitely *other*.

Something that can hardly be seen, but which, paradoxically, occupies the entire field of vision. Something that cannot be understood, but which

consumes every last bit of cognition.

Something outrageously alive.

The Legend will call the twenty-four-hour stretch that follows the Day of Traps. It is the Day of the Men of the Territory. It is their day.

It is the great *daynight* of Yuri, and Campbell, and Francisco Alpini. Never have they killed so many men in so little time.

The Territory is alive in them. They are machines of the Territory. They are living traps: camouflage, ambushes, diversions, illusions, disinformation, surprise attacks, commando operations. It is their specialty. On foot and at the wheel of their Ford Super Duty, they torment the flanks and isolated rear guards, luring entire companies into the traps manned by one or two militia squadrons, positioned in such a way as to inflict as much damage as possible in a minimum amount of time.

Sheriff Langlois wants to use the vanguard tactically. He redistributes his troops, saying: “They’ve lost a lot of men in their direct attacks on the Ridge. They’re trying to get around the obstacle. We need to wait for them in the right places and kill them. Kill as many as we can.”

The Law of Bronze is implacable. It will stay that way until the very last second.

Campbell adds: “We should especially try to get their officers and section leaders. Even in the form of a multicloned biological network, they need the organization necessary in every war, even this last one, *especially* this last one. *The chain of command*. That’s what we, the county cops, have to break.”

We, the cops. Yuri barely blinks. They have become county cops. Just like the soldier-monk. All they are missing are the uniforms, but, Yuri realizes, they have been wearing those for a long time in their heads.

They are Territory Men. They are living traps. They are cops without uniforms—the most formidable kind of all.

So they kill. Even more than they did the day before.

Yuri and Campbell have patiently briefed the sheriff’s men on the right way to set their traps, like a machine interconnecting secret devices dedicated to death.

Welcome to the Territory. If your attack is going very well, it’s an ambush.

The Anomians cannot see that their attack is going *too well*. They cannot understand that their attack is going so well because they have just entered *Ambush Territory*. They will realize it only at the moment when the Territory decides they can.

Kill the unit commanders. As many of them as possible. Kill the section leaders, especially the experienced ones. To kill a man is to kill two men at once—that is, who he is and who he might become.

Belfond and his commanders follow up their massive frontal attacks with a series of penetration and assault operations on the wings. Two mistakes in a row. Attacking the enemy's strong point. Then scattering your forces while you still have a numerical advantage.

The best trap, Campbell often says, is the one built by the very person who falls into it.

The Day of Traps. The Day of Territory Machines. They are like the poisonous plants reincarnated.

They are winning, because they are gaining what there is to be gained. Time. The time necessary for the Construction of the Vessel. They will die—all of them, probably, but they will win the battle for time. They will win the very last war.

When twenty-four hours have passed, at the end of this Day of Traps, the sheriff sums up the operation so far.

- 1) They haven't lost an inch of land.
- 2) They have repulsed both frontal attacks and bypass maneuvers.
- 3) They estimate enemy losses at around 30 percent, at least four thousand men in two days.
- 4) They have lost thirty-eight Guardians—dead or seriously wounded, which might as well be the same thing.
- 5) The ratio of losses is equivalent to the differential balance of the forces present. They have lost one man for every hundred in the Anome's army.
- 6) That means that the overall homeostasis has been maintained: they will keep fighting at one against one hundred, or very nearly. One

killer against one hundred. One death against one hundred. Which means that in the best-case scenario, all of them, *every single one of them*, will die.

In the nomenclature of the Legend, the fifth day of the Construction of the Vessel will be called the Day of the Great Silence. Apocryphal tradition will also call it the Day of the Brief Peace. It is the day of the ceasefire. One that is not even negotiated. A simple pause ordered de facto on both sides of the battlefield. Thus this very last of all wars imitates all those that have preceded it, down to the inevitable armistice that will just as inevitably be broken.

The guns fall silent. The silence falls like a mute sky on the Territory-within-the-Territory. The silence plunges each man into the liquid helium of his own solitude. Only the sounds made by the Halo, just barely audible, keep each singularity company in its soundlessness. Silence is the only conqueror on this day. The dead and wounded are taken from the battlefield—by the necro Triads and the neoecology of recycling on one side, and the ancient human tradition of military burial on the other.

The Vessel continues its celestial development, heedless of the events unfolding around it on the surface of this Earth from which it is wresting itself little by little.

The armistice is broken on the morning of the sixth day. Its only real purpose, of course, was providing time for both sides to reorganize their troops. And now this last of all wars resumes as if it never stopped. As if none of the wars that preceded it ever stopped.

None of the wars have ever stopped. Each of them has simply been followed by a stretch of peace separating it from the next one. This last of all wars is separated from them now by the last of all peaces. Total Peace, Universal Peace, World Peace. Omega Peace.

This sixth and last day of the Construction of the Vessel will be known as the Day of Light.

Probably because it is the darkest day of all.

The luminosity emitted by the metamachine is so bright that it is now creating series of optical illusions, perihelia in twin constellations inside the Halo. The brightness reaches such a magnitude that the Vessel itself, like the Ark, is refracted, its image doubling. Yuri knows that the Halo and this

optical splitting are part of the exact same event. This is the nature of light, its singularity—that which makes it what we see, just as much as the means by which we see.

At this level of intensity, the light eventually plunges the universe into deepest darkness. The darkness born of blinding, born of the consumption of the optic nerve, the consumption of the brain itself.

This Day of the Blind, as the Legend will also refer to it, is probably the deadliest day so far. The numbers/losses ratio is more or less maintained; the problem is that, despite this continuous equilibrium between losses inflicted and the enemy's numeric superiority, the combatants are rapidly reaching rupture points, "levels" at which the ratio, however numerically identical, has a totally different impact on the land. Maps have nothing to do with the Territory now. Numbers cannot encompass life, much less death.

Yuri and Campbell realize—simultaneously, as always—that this will be the Day when most of the defenders will die.

The Law of the Territory is clearly visible in the light, all the way until your eyes close.

Bob Chamberlain is shot in the head when, with his partner and a militia squadron led by Lady van Harpel, they surprise the rear guard of an enemy battalion near Nexus Road. The old Catholic sibyl dies along with him, fighting to the last bullet, the last blast of gunpowder.

Jane Delorette dies with Villalobos when their truck is hit head-on by an RPG-7 rocket fired by an elite enemy formation.

Alex la Varende, Florian Schutzberg, Scot Montrose, Patrick Doyle, and Virgil Fermont meet their deaths in similar conditions as they execute the tactical maneuvers developed during the Day of Traps, luring the enemy to the places where it can be killed. This final time, the enemy seriously damages the trap by falling into it. That is the problem with this Day of Light; even the highest-functioning optical devices are useless. The trappers cannot see any better than the trapped. More than once, the trap turns on the predators—and they go from being living traps into being victims.

Mary-Ann Beaulieu and Fernand Claymore die this way. Later, Lecerf, who has performed his role as mobile sniper marvelously since the beginning, is surrounded by a whole enemy unit west of the cosmodrome

and fights for hours, alone, cut off from the rest of the Guardians since the death of Schutzberg, his partner. He kills dozens of men, all day, until he runs out of ammunition. The Anomians who fall on him to finish him off find a smiling young man holding a sort of cable in his hand. A second later, four high-power defensive grenades blow up everything within ten meters of his body, of which nothing will ever be found.

But the numbers/losses ratio holds. No sacrifice is pointless. No sacrifice derogates from the Law.

It was the correct tactic. One might even say that it was the best one, because it was the only possible one. Yet it creates an ongoing nonnumeric differential, a *topological* differential. The ratio remains the same, but for each man lost on their side, hundreds of square meters of terrain are made available to the enemy. The Ridge is becoming more and more difficult to defend. The Anome will add lateral surrounding maneuvers to its frontal offensive.

This time, it will be the end.

Campbell says only: "We have to kill more of them. A lot more of them." And Yuri thinks: *We will always have to kill more of them. We will have to kill them for all eternity. But we only have a day or two left.*

They will have to kill *all* of them, he realizes.

And the mathematical consequence of this is that they, the defenders, will all have to die, too. There can be no doubt of it.

It is the only kind of equilibrium the Territory can tolerate.

* * *

Legend will call the Seventh Day the Day of Departure.

As the Vessel of Infinity whirls slowly toward the zenith, getting farther and farther away from the planet of Men, leaving final *photosonic* bursts of its light-music to individuate in each of the surviving singularities there, the very last battles are being fought in the Territory-within-the-Territory, and a sort of moonlit dimness falls over the universe. The unyielding light of the Halo in one's retinas makes daylight look like midnight at the full moon, a continual night, the hours of which no one cares to count. This is the day when the last Guardians will die, even as the Anomian army begins to be pushed back by the advancing deadly zones slowly being created by the Territory-within-the-Territory.

This is the day Chrysler Campbell dies.

There are fewer than a hundred Guardians of the Territory left: Yuri, Campbell, Alpini; the last of the sheriff's men—Langlois himself, Cyril Clarke, Slade Vernier, Erwin Slovak, and Lewis Duchenal, the Manitoban mixed-blood. And then what remains of the county militia. Eighty soldiers in total. Not counting Balthazar, the bionic dog still watching over the sheriff and his deputy.

On the other side, Belfond and his commanders still have an army of more than eight thousand men. The one-against-one-hundred ratio still stands. But this time they have reached the breaking point. The brigades of neohumanity will attempt a mixed offensive, with a frontal assault supported by attacks on the flanks, until the final encirclement. They will give it all they've got before the ontological barrier closes completely.

And the last eighty Guardians of the Territory will give it all they've got, too, for as long as the Vessel has not been joined by the Ark of the Singularity, for as long as the hyperluminous body of Link de Nova has not been crowned by its metabrain, they will keep fighting, keep killing, keep dying.

The moment when the structure will be most fragile, the electric boy said. The moment they must win at all costs. The Vessel is a huge, brilliant spark in the night-blue sky. It will reach orbit in two or three hours. Then the Ark will be able to join it. The final mission of the Law of Bronze will put the final period on its own existence.

They will put everything they have left into this last battle.

We will all die, thinks Yuri. All of us. We will all die, on both sides.

The Law of the Territory will be the only winner of this war. And its victory will be precisely this null match. Its victory will be mutual assured destruction.

It is the very last chance for life on this planet.

Lewis Duchenal and Erwin Slovak, partners now, are the first to fall, having inflicted a veritable massacre on an entire enemy column, which they cut down with machine guns while driving at full speed through the ranks, north of the strip. Yuri knows it wasn't really a suicide operation; the two men evaluated their chances and took the risk. And they killed or wounded two hundred neomen all by themselves during their final commando

maneuver. They respected the ratio; they preserved the equilibrium of the Law to the end.

Very rapidly, the rest of them form a circle, like the famous circle of covered wagons that left for the Far West eons ago, the ones the pioneers huddled in on the plains when they were attacked by Indian tribes. All the pickups and the other vehicles, in working order or not, including those recovered from the enemy, as well as a few carcasses the Vessel left on the periphery of Humvee, are assembled around the summit of the Ridge.

The mesa becomes a citadel of metal.

The last citadel. The last one that must hold.

The last one that must fall.

From the top of the Ridge, finding a place to station himself and reload all his weapons, Yuri can see the configuration of the crater left by the rising of the Vessel. He notices a bizarre detail, incongruous against the landscape, and unexpected to say the least.

His shelter has been left by the Vessel, as if forgotten, in the middle of the former city of Heavy Metal. Just like the plastic and metal debris there. The tires. The windshields, rearview mirrors, dashboards. Pieces of engines. Radiator grilles. Car seats. Bumpers. Two windmills joined by a system of gears. It is as if the Vessel *wanted* to leave these relics behind. Yuri cannot understand why.

Slade Vernier falls in his turn, alongside Balthazar. A blast of M60 machine-gun fire destroys the weakest part of the pickup that was serving as his firing post, ripping apart human and animal flesh with the same short-range volley. The heavy 7.62-millimeter bullets cause geysers of red to spurt from his body as he falls backward, killed cleanly, his Desert Eagle still solidly clutched in his death-stiffening hand like an immovable prosthesis. The bionic dog is nothing but an indistinct mass of blood and shattered biocomponents. He takes a few seconds to die, his eye fixed on the Ark.

Then an automatic-weapons cross fire takes out Cyril Clarke, who falls less than two meters away from Yuri, the upper half of his body reduced to a mist of blood and flesh.

Later, Yuri sees an RPG-7 rocket pulverize a stack of car bodies behind which Francisco Alpini has been firing, a good position dominating the east

of the Ridge. His body torn by pieces of shrapnel and metal, Alpini fights for a few hours afterward; then, feeling the end approach, he carries out a true kamikaze maneuver, a furious charge, guns blazing, with the final pyrotechnic of the detonation of a belt of C-4s in the very middle of a battalion of attackers.

The Circle of Steel, the Ring of the Ridge, is holding to the end. It holds until only Sheriff Langlois, Yuri, and Campbell remain. It is still holding. They have only a few hand weapons left, the Soviet Tokarev and the SS Luger, and a small store of bullets. It holds. Until the inevitable happens.

A complete breakdown on both sides. No more ammunition. The clicking of empty guns is heard for several minutes, like the sound of a strange animal, at once subterranean and aerial, organic and mechanical, the paradoxical noise of the silence of killing machines. The song of firing pins meeting nothing except steel, vibrating against nothing. The silent rhapsody of chambers without bullets, of barrels that will never be anything again but empty tubes, triggers that will never be pressed by a finger again. The metallic sound of the end of the mechanical war.

The strategy of the citadel has demonstrated its adequacy as part of the Law. Not only have they substantially increased the ratio of numbers to losses, they have held on long enough to exhaust the enemy's ammunition supply. And their own, too, of course. But they have held on long enough for the Vessel to reach orbit. They have held on long enough that the Ark will soon join it. They have held on long enough for the ontological border to close again. The Anomes cannot stay one hour longer in the Territory-within-the-Territory. Many units have already been caught in the trap of the invisible protective wall that is reassembling randomly, in spots, in the most unpredictable manner. The singular ontology of the "wall" reminds them that the border is only *a line of demarcation*; it was the placement of the beginning of the Territory-within-the-Territory; its topology is mobile. It is a whole zone that will prove fatal, little by little, for the immortals.

Like a sublime perfection of the former ecology of the Territory.

It is at that very moment that a shot rings out. A single shot. They will say it was the very last shot fired in Grand Junction. They will say it was the very last shot fired on Earth.

A single gunshot. It resonates, ringing recognizably, ordinarily, mundanely, as such sounds have for centuries. The singular sound of hot metal being projected at the speed of sound. It is fired from far away but very precisely aimed, a large-caliber bullet.

A bullet that strikes the sheriff directly in the forehead. Sheriff Wilbur Langlois, the man of the Law of Bronze, is thus the very last man to be killed by a gun. The Legend is very clear on that point.

For death has not yet finished giving life to the secret economy of the Territory.

The last of all wars resembles all wars, back to the very first one of them.

And the first war was fought with bare hands, or very nearly.

It was fought in the manner of the very first men, in the manner of the wild inhabitants of all ecologies.

It was fought according to the rules of animal life.

It was fought in accordance with the primary principle of the Territory.

50 > *THAT'S ALL RIGHT, MAMA*

It is ontological. A firearm without ammunition becomes a hand weapon. It is equipped with a bayonet at the very least; in the best case it is a quarterstaff, a bat, a billy club, a blunt instrument.

The very first weapon in the world.

They still have their combat swords as well: for Yuri, his small Nepalese Gurkha saber with its curved blade; for Campbell, his long-toothed Navy Seals knife. The sword: the first technical perfection of the bladed weapon.

They have something to strike with, to cut with, to stab with, to pierce with, to cut throats and disembowel with.

And so does the enemy.

The enemy. These three people approaching the Circle of Steel, while below, to the south, the rest of the army flees through the last gaps left in the invisible border, leaving thousands of “corpses” behind them.

Yuri and Campbell recognize them instantly. Two men, one woman. Belfond, the rotten cop promoted to general, and his two personal bodyguards: Wanda Walker, the former strip gladiatrix, and Lee Kwan Osborne, the Korean American military doctor turned poisoner-assassin.

Yuri and Campbell emerge slowly from the Circle of Steel. It is time. The moment they were born for has come. The last moment.

Belfond is still holding the long Winchester rifle topped with a powerful telescope that he used to kill Sheriff Langlois.

All three of them know they have lost. They know they will not leave the Territory-within-the-Territory alive, that the ontological barrier will kill them.

The Vessel is getting farther away with each passing minute. In the Ark the light is fading, losing its fluidity; the sounds of infinity disappearing frequency by frequency, going back to where they came from. The last trap is about to snap shut on them.

There is nothing left to do but kill the people responsible for their defeat.

And, without a doubt, these are the people responsible. The last two Men of the Territory, the last two Men of the Law of Bronze. Yuri McCoy and Chrysler Campbell.

So the very last war will be fought with bare hands. Or very nearly. It will be fought in a false night copied from the dawn of time. It will be fought between four men and one woman. Two against three. The initial ratio has been brought down to a reasonable number, but the fundamental imbalance necessary for the actualization of any conflict is still there, like the last Pillar of the Law.

The last of all wars will end with no eyewitness except the elements and the animals of the Territory, like the large purple crow soaring in high, large circles above the former site of the cosmodrome.

It will end like a family quarrel gone wrong. It will end like all wars begin.

Yuri and Campbell look at each other for an instant, enough time to synchronize their minds one last time, to send a clear and final message.

In this type of situation three tactics can prevail; certain accidental conditions determine the eventual choice:

- 1) In order to gain a strategic advantage right away, kill the leader, or the strongest man, immediately. The only problem: if he is the leader he is most probably also the strongest man, and thus the hardest to kill.
- 2) In order to turn numeric inferiority into parity, strike immediately at the weakest link in the chain to eliminate any need for diplomacy. The problem is the risk-to-benefit ratio: in the best-case scenario you will only find yourself with numbers equal to the enemy's.
- 3) The initial attack must always be concentrated on the target according to a ratio of at least two against one. Redistribute the numerical advantage locally and temporarily in order to equalize it in the end.

The problem is not so much knowing who their leader is, who the dominant man is, because Belfond is officially and obviously that man. The

question is, which of the two others is the true weak link? The powerful strip gladiatrix or the Asian expert in poisons of all kinds?

Osborne is like the incarnation of all the old venomous plants that can now be found only in the county of HMT. He is as dangerous as Territory cowbane.

But Yuri and Campbell are the Trap-Men. The floral devices of Grand Junction have been part of their everyday world since they were children. They are the Camp Doctors; poison holds no secrets from them.

The master poisoner, then, will come up against the Territory's venom.

He will come up against the Law.

And the Law strikes him. Like a flash. A double flash of flesh and shining metal.

It is simple, direct, quick.

Yuri and Campbell fall on him in such a way that Yuri is able to cover a counterattack from Belfond and the gladiatrix. It is very simple, very direct, very quick. The blades come up, sparkling rods of silver, and they sketch lines of mercury as they lunge at the man's body and pull back, red and glistening, while Yuri and Campbell dance like ghosts around him. Yuri stabs him four times in two quick thrusts; the first slices across his neck, and the second, with the point, gets him right between the shoulder blades. The spinal cord, he hopes, has been cut at least once now. Campbell simply slashes him back and forth across the throat; on the first pass his Navy Seals diving knife cuts the carotid artery, which explodes in a spray of crimson droplets, a thousand scarlet points glittering in the false night that reigns over the world. With the second pass, a very deep gash brings forth thicker, viscous red blood.

The man emits an unintelligible cry mingled with a gasp of surprise. His latex-gloved hands, each holding a long, sharpened spike gleaming with some sort of poison, flap frenetically in all directions.

Campbell finishes him off with a violent slash right in the face. A gout of blood accompanies the man's final slump onto Territory soil, as his head detaches halfway from his body. The false night is red. Ultrared.

They have broken the weakest link in a single blow. They have broken it so rapidly that the other two cannot even react.

For a few seconds, at least.

The rifles-turned-hand-weapons quickly end up on the ground. They are moving to the more sophisticated phase of the first war—the battle of blades. It is the last kind of progress. The very last one.

It is at this moment of disconnection that, probably, destiny finds the energy necessary for actualization. The distribution of forces, the redivision of lines of frontal collision, the crystallization of points of no return.

Chemistry.

The chemistry of blood, metal, and earth.

The particular chemistry of men who are going to kill one another.

We always seek to acquire what we are missing, for the good or the bad. We choose each other; we always choose each other in twos, mutually, because we know we will be together until death. We choose each other in the scarlet brotherhood of spilled blood, of blood that will be spilled, of all the blood that has ever been spilled. We choose each other by mutual agreement—as mutual as it is perfectly tacit.

We choose each other because we know that one of us is going to kill the other one.

The couples form, as if on a dance floor; the duos are created, the terminal engagements, the pure love of steel in blinding light.

Yuri quickly finds himself facing off against Belfond, who has just extracted a long, heavy scythe-bladed machete from a holster on his back. Campbell is confronting the gladiatrix from the strip, who is armed with a fireman's axe. Once more two events happen simultaneously, in parallel, but with their own respective rules. Two perspectives of war, of the Law, of infinity.

Two beginnings, two unfoldings, two endings. Two lives.

Two lives compressed into a few minutes.

Two lives that crystallize, here, now, everything they have ever been.

Within the Circle of Steel, the very last citadel to have fought and the very last that will fall, at the center of the Ridge, the Ark is now nothing but continuous, varying ultraviolet light interspersed with silvery flashes. It has turned from the white of a star into a cobalt blue full moon that will, now, illuminate the final encounter between human predators.

This final encounter that resembles so closely the very first one.

Yuri McCoy. Johnson Belfond.

Chrysler Campbell. Wanda Walker.

A machete, a Gurkha sword, an axe, a diving knife.

It is a strange thing; a battle that lasts just a few minutes can only be described as if it lasted for hours. Because in a battle, each second is directly connected to death. Each second is directly connected to infinity. Each second spans a lifetime, because it could be the last.

Epic metaphor is the only solution, the ellipsis encircling the metaphysics of War, the bloody poetry of the god Mars.

The Dance of Sabers. The Song of Blades. The Music of Knives.

How to juxtapose, one more time, two coevolving realities? How to truly place them in parallel? What central point of view to adopt?

The Dance of Sabers. The Song of Blades. The Music of Knives.

If there is anyone who can follow the ballet along both of its parallel lines, it is the large purple crow flying over the Ridge and the former cosmodrome. The crow sees; it can discriminate; it can adopt several successive points of view. It can see the secret diagrams at work. It can guess who will live and who will die.

The machete strikes the Gurkha sword with a dry, sharp noise like a detonation. Under the violence of the blow, Yuri's weapon drops. Belfond is a determined brute. He is also a good combatant. He knows how to wield his machete. Yuri is forced into a defensive position, Belfond constantly on the offensive, a wide grin on his face.

Territory techniques, thinks Yuri during one of the rare pauses between attacks. Campbell's techniques. *Mixed martial arts techniques*.

They are the one solution—the only solution—offered by the Law of Bronze.

To succeed in the first place, it is not the enemy who must be eliminated, but his weapon.

Yuri knows now that his Nepalese sword will protect him for quite a while, but in the end it will succumb. Same strength ratio goes for Chrysler, with his submarine combat knife against an axe. So the very last of all wars must be taken back to its initial stage, the most elementary of all.

They will have to kill the enemy with their bare hands.

Only the purple crow knows, probably. Only the Territory crow can guess the point where the two lines will diverge absolutely and permanently. It can already see them reconfiguring themselves to their own polarities.

Even as he parries Belfond's thrusts, Yuri catches several glimpses of what is going on twenty meters away, where Campbell is battling the gladiatrix from the strip.

Chrysler evades an attack and takes advantage of the opportunity to strike out, cutting deeply as he does—and Wanda Walker's forearm is now nothing but a cascade of blood gushing onto her fireman's axe.

Yuri recoils to avoid a sharp blow from Belfond. He tries a counterattack in his turn, but comes perilously close to having the enemy's blade cleave his head in two; only a reflex from the deepest recesses of his training permits him to save his own skin.

Wanda Walker attacks again, managing this time to slam her axe heavily into Chrysler's knife, which flies out of his hand like an arrow, but Campbell responds with a pure Thai boxing maneuver, a circular kick that directly strikes the wounded arm of the gladiatrix, who slowly lets her weapon drop. Campbell follows up with a nasty high kick to the temple; the woman, stunned, sways and falls on one knee in front of him, her head slumping forward. It is the perfect position for a *vale tudo*-type penalty kick—a fast kick in the jaw with a recoil of several meters, as if sending a soccer ball deep into the net.

The woman falls backward and rolls to one side. It is Campbell's moment now. He is already on her, crouched over her body, holding her down with his knees. He is unleashing his full fury on her, raining blows on her face at two per second, left-right jabs, as if attacking a punching bag.

Belfond's attack is vicious; Yuri does not notice him pick up a handful of dirt and gravel, but suddenly his eyes are full of the blinding mixture. Too late, he remembers one of Campbell's first lessons: *In person-to-person combat, the only thing you should focus on is your opponent.* He manages to avoid the next thrust by throwing himself to the ground in a controlled jiu-jitsu roll.

The purple crow could help him, of course, but that is not its role. A Territory animal, part of the aerial force of Grand Junction, it is there to observe, to report to the dead what happens in the world of the living, always watching, never even trying to understand.

* * *

Yuri is not aware of the full extent to which the Territory has synchronized them, him and Campbell; only the purple crow knows it.

The gladiatrix's formidable body mass and bull-like energy allow her to reverse the situation in her favor several times—or, at least, to wriggle out of Campbell's traps.

For example, the Kimura key he patiently executes in his crouched position above her body: his right hand seizes her right wrist, keeping her arm bent like a chicken wing, elbow pointed upward, fist downward; then he slides his left arm between her bicep and her forearm, trapped at a right angle, so that his left hand and right fist can, with an ultraquick lateral rotation, flip the enemy joint skyward while her forearm is immovably bent outward. But, screaming in pain, using all her own weight, striking with all her strength, the gladiatrix manages to wrench herself away from him. Pain is an indicator of impairment; when he stands, he can see in the girl's contorted face that he has torn numerous muscles, perhaps dislocated others. Campbell applies rule number one of mixed martial arts: *Above all, knock your enemy to the ground.* Again and again his heel flies up in a violent kick to the gladiatrix's face, which rapidly turns purple with bruising. When she does manage to rise, a roundhouse kick sends her staggering. Campbell attacks again, using a front kick to knock her off balance again, but the girl easily outweighs his hundred kilos; the blow to her solar plexus causes her to gasp and scream out in pain, but it does not fell her. She gathers herself again, and her tactic is obvious: make Campbell fall as fast as she can, and then overwhelm him with her sheer body mass. A series of direct blows, and then she pounces on him and his defensive knee thrusts do nothing to prevent her from pummeling him brutally into the ground.

Belfond and Yuri are caught up in their own Dance of Sabers, Song of Blades, Music of Knives. They circle each other like tigers. Yuri has not been able to mount a single attack against Belfond, but none of Belfond's assaults has borne fruit, either. Neither of them has even wounded the other. Yuri knows that in this type of combat, the first to be wounded is often the first to die. And the first wound is often enough to do the job.

And Belfond knows it, too. His attacks become more cautious as Yuri begins to understand and anticipate the main tactics he is using. He may be

immortal, but time is not on his side.

Yuri sees the impressive bulk of the gladiatrix on top of Campbell. She is big enough to dominate him easily with all her weight, lying in a lateral position, out of reach of his feet and knees.

She is using the battering force of her knees as well as her fists. Systematically, between two series of heavy blows right in his face, she raises her enormous mass above Campbell's immobilized body, bends her right leg, and slams her knee as hard as she can into his bloodied face, which will surely be crushed in a few more seconds.

More clashing of metal blades. Belfond is moving faster now; he wants to finish this. But to do that, he needs to take more risks. He manages to shove Yuri up against the grille of a big Chevy truck set into the external wall of the Circle of Steel. His blade flashes in all directions. Yuri fights back, parrying and counterslashing; he doesn't know exactly how he is doing what he is doing, but it's working—much better than it should, given the fact that his eyes are full of blood that is red, very red, in the night.

Tactics against numbers. Technique against Mass. It is thanks to this fundamental Territory principle that Campbell escapes, that he manages to wriggle away from Walker, to slide underneath her body, holding one of her fists firmly down. He throws his two crossed legs around the gladiatrix's head, trapping her arm against the ground at the same time—and then it is classic, splendid *juji-gatame*: dragging your adversary backward, pulling to break her neck, using the key component—her head—caught between your own legs.

Tendons rip, cartilage breaks, muscle fibers tear. A cry of pain rings out.

Seen from the sky, the situation is not unfolding in Yuri's favor. True, he has wounded his opponent, but only superficially—nothing more than a bloody laceration running from shoulder to forearm. He has not been able to regain the upper hand. The purple crow gets closer to the scene. No detail escapes it.

After an exchange of kicks and punches in the standing position, Campbell finds himself once again at a disadvantage and on the ground. This time the gladiatrix falls on him with all her weight, 115 kilograms at least. She is trying to hold him down at a higher point on his body, the thorax, in order to try a guillotine-hold strangling. Campbell knows all the traps. He does

nothing to prevent her from getting into the position she wants. He drops his chin and protects his neck with his forearms. A barrage of punches attempts to make him let go, but he holds on. So she uses her elbows, her head, even a rock snatched from the ground nearby. The girl's arm is ready to crush his throat. Campbell knows that if he is hit full-on by the rock, he will be finished. He knows the moment has come.

The moment of triangular strangulation. He raises his legs toward the sky, as if for *juji-gatame*; this time he crosses them around her neck, managing to grab her wrist with one of his hands. Then all he has to do is bend his legs and to tighten, tighten, tighten; this will break the cervical vertebrae, causing asphyxiation by compression of the whole laryngopharyngeal system, and it is extremely painful.

Yuri has just been wounded in his turn. He managed to avoid the circular movement of the machete aiming for his stomach, but the blade made a large gash in the flesh of his left thigh as it passed. He easily blocks the thrust that follows, but then finds himself forced to recoil, recoil, recoil. Endlessly. But he holds on, parrying, striking the enemy blade with his own. He fights.

Something tells the purple crow that the battle is nearing its end. It does not know why, because *whys* don't interest this Territory bird. What counts for it, and for those who will be hearing what it has to say, is *how*.

The lines of destiny are diverging farther and farther, the purple crow knows.

For the young man named Yuri McCoy, the outcome will be determined by a mistake committed by the man called Belfond, a mistake for which the counterattack can be at once instinctive and completely lethal.

For Campbell the solution is something else entirely, and it is he who will choose it.

Back on his feet, he faces the gladiatrix. He knows he will not be able to beat her with a simple combination of kicks and punches, but he also knows he has bruised her. And he knows that on the ground her weight is both an advantage and a handicap. A handicap is just an advantage that meets the Territory, thinks Campbell.

It is so simple then: a Vovchanchyn punch launched from behind his back, masking the position, the angle of his arm until the last instant; then the fist hits in a direct slice—that is, with a lot of amplitude in it—and slams downward from temple to ear to jaw. She is stunned. Then a series of

low kicks to weaken her thighs, which are as thick as tree trunks. Let her come now. There.

He throws himself forward, legs straight in front of him, launching himself at her neck, clamping her neck between his thigh muscles exactly as he would for a triangular stranglehold. He takes her down to the ground with him, suffering a series of brutal punches to his head but managing to carry his plan through; the idea is to end up in a dominated position underneath the gladiatrix, but voluntarily this time, so that she is perfectly situated to be garroted by a half nelson. This time the key will be turned all the way in the lock. Until her bones break. Until the deadly crack sounds. The important word here is *voluntarily*. What will be different is that it will be a deadly trap. A typical Territory trap.

The purple crow knows this. Just like it knows all the rest.

A deadly trap can be very slow or very fast. There is no in-between.

Belfond makes a serious mistake. Surely the only one of his whole life. And the last one. A very simple, banal error. In the Territory, the simplest of errors can immediately turn into a fatal mistake.

Undoubtedly unnerved by Yuri's agility and resilience, he becomes more unsteady. Just a little more. A little too unsteady. One of his attacks is very poorly executed. Yuri dodges it easily. Again an imbalance. Belfond is easy prey for the powerful high kick that costs him several teeth and sends him crashing to the ground, groggy, as his machete falls away. Then it is all so simple, so direct, so perfect.

The Law of the Territory.

If you offer Death an inch, it will take a mile.

Yuri kneels beside Belfond. He reads in the man's glassy eyes that the last general in history is ready. Ready or not, the Law of the Territory will be preserved; he will die. The enemy has been beaten.

"You haven't got a chance," Yuri tells him, just before slashing the Gurkha blade across his throat, slicing it cleanly.

The steel brings forth a gout of blood as it clangs against the rock underneath Belfond's head.

There. It is finished. The Seventh Day of the Construction of the Vessel is ending with this double victory. This double murder that will end the whole history of murders.

The Territory is no one's friend, but you can try to befriend it, says a local proverb that Campbell repeats often. *You didn't try hard enough,*

thinks Yuri.

Campbell turns his blue-blotched, puffy, bloody face toward Yuri. Hematomas, bumps, multiple lacerations. His face has doubled in size. He disentangles himself with difficulty from the unmoving body of the gladiatrix. The Gurkha sword, red with the blood of the last general in human history, still in his hand, Yuri walks toward him with a wide smile.

Campbell obviously had a very bad fifteen minutes before coming out on top, during which the situation turned against him not once, but twice. Yuri, on the other hand, was constantly dominated until the flash of genius that allowed him to seize his chance. *Controlled coincidence*, they call it in the Territory.

They have survived. They have conquered. They have kept the Territory and its Law safe. They have saved the Vessel.

Campbell stands up, swaying. He looks blearily at the two corpses, fifteen meters apart.

“They may be immortal, but the Territory is invincible.”

The two bodies metamorphose into their numeric essence—semibiological, semispectral forms, reduced to a catalogue of digital organs, mingling bit by bit with the ecology of the Territory. Soon they will be re-cloned.

At the center of the Circle of Steel, the Ark is emitting a single bluish point of light with occasional flashes of quicksilver. It’s only a matter of minutes now. Link de Nova’s metabrain will shut down on this Earth to be reborn in the Vessel, which is waiting in orbit. He will leave nothing behind but a transfinite micropoint, the “aleph point” that will continue to watch over the Territory-within-the-Territory, that will allow the ontological border to be preserved, that will permit the Vessel to come back.

They have fought. They have won. They have kept the Territory and its Law safe. Together. In synchronicity. The two of them.

The three of them, counting the Ark.

The Ark, which is getting darker each second, fading little by little into the false night of the last day.

“It will leave soon,” says Yuri.

And it does leave. In a last silvery flash, it disappears suddenly from the Ridge. They can just see a ghostly gleam appear and vanish again, above

them, at the zenith.

Yuri looks at Campbell. The Territory has won. They knew how to protect it. They knew how to make sure the Law was respected.

Link de Nova has become the Vessel of Infinity; now its assembly will be completed in space before the Great Departure.

They have succeeded. This false night is worth any triumphant dawn.

Campbell looks at him, and smiles.

Then he falls to the ground, plunged brutally and deeply into an irreversible coma.

Yuri spends almost an hour trying to bring his friend back to consciousness. It is no use; the purple crow knows it; it watched the whole battle, every microsecond, every single thing that happened.

During the second submission, the one Campbell escaped from in extremis thanks to the triangular strangulation move, the violence of the punches he received, their number, their placement near sensitive cephalic areas, all of this—added to the shocks he underwent during the various other exchanges—yes, all of it has finally taken its toll on his cerebral structure.

Yuri knows it: just a single internal hemorrhage would be enough.

It is enough. Campbell will be the last man to die by another's hand.

Campbell dies with the perfect sense of timing that marked his whole life. He fought, he won, he was there for the departure of the Ark, and then he died, the smile still on his lips.

Everything is all right.

They will be Territory Men forever. Dead or alive, they have accomplished the very last mission entrusted by the Law to its Guardians. They will not see the Orbital Ring; they will never join the Vessel of Infinity; they will never know the Third Humanity. They will both remain here, in this bit of the world they have always belonged to, but which belongs to no one. They will watch over the Territory-within-the-Territory. They will watch over the Sanctuary. They will pass the torch to other watchers when the time comes; until then, they will watch unceasingly—and, in any case, the micropoint of singularity will know what to do.

They will wait here in every sense of the word, here in the Territory, ready for the Second Coming.

The eighth day, according to the Legend, is called the Morning of the Night.

The Vessel has left orbit; it is no longer visible from Earth, not even in the astronomic telescope belonging to Judith that Yuri finds in her cabin along with the young woman's good-bye letter to him, written in response to the text he gave her a few days before the Departure. The letter contains a very simple message. A few words that focus on all the light of infinity, the whole sunlit night of their love. The Legend does not pass on the exact contents of the letter. Like the one Judith took with her on her journey into the Cosmos, this missive will remain secret. The last secret of the Territory.

Yuri also finds another object, lying on his own bed as if placed there by a human hand. It is Link de Nova's Gibson guitar, with a mini amplifier, a digital recorder, and a series of tablatures with chords and divisions. It is the last electric guitar in the world. It is with this guitar that he will continue to compose his songs about the Territory. The last rhapsodies. The last rhapsodies on the last world.

The Anome's army has retreated, far, very far from the Territory-within-the-Territory and its invisible, deadly border. He is alone. The last man. The last man, alone.

The Morning of the Night is marked by several "days" of sharp brightness during which the sun makes its appearance and traces its usual path through the sky. But this sun is no brighter than a full moon. It is just a ghostly shadow of itself, a yellowish dot hardly larger than a star. The long, luminous *daynight* has given way to its dark opposite.

Yuri realizes that the Vessel altered local Time and Space to depart for Infinity. What he is seeing at this moment are the last instants in the life of the star that shone for billions of years on the Planet of Men. He knows this is a message, not just a simple spatial-temporal illusion. When the Anome withdraws its fingers from this Earth, its white universal sun will return for thousands of years. But its end has already been written, too. The Vessel of Infinity will come back as well. It will come back to bring the News. The News of the Coming.

Yuri spends the next several days burying all the dead. More than a hundred and fifty men and women. No question of a mass grave. Every one of them has the right to an individual tomb topped with a cross. He gives them that, and in so doing he continues the first cemetery begun during the Day of the Great Silence, at the northern base of the Ridge, in a vast semicircle that surrounds the point of quantum singularity left behind by the

Vessel at the summit of the mesa. He finds tools for the job in his cabin—picks, shovels, spades, a magnetic jackhammer—enough to dig a good fifteen graves per day. Up at dawn, his hands in the earth, his feet on the rocks; to bed well after sunset, he hardly sleeps; in the chrome-colored sky, the sun of the *aworld* moves silently above him and the bodies he is burying. With each grave the uniqueness of the individual he is covering with sand and rocky dirt comes back to him in memory: Slade Vernier and his killing Desert Eagle; Sheriff Langlois, the Man of the Law of Bronze, with his decisive pronunciations; Francisco Alpini, the very last soldier-monk; Erwin Slovak and his predatory intuitions; Scot Montrose, the oldest of the Guardians; Bob Chamberlain, the dutiful patrol officer. All of them, each of them, lived, killed, and died for the Law of the Territory.

He stays for a whole day beside the body of Chrysler Campbell as it lies beside its grave.

They talk for a long time. They remember all the not-so-long-ago days of their respective childhoods and adolescences, so recent, hardly an eternity. They talk about the growth of their friendship amid the ruins, during the End of Mankind. They exchange a few specialist points of view on firearms, motor vehicles, Territory traps. Yuri brings up Link de Nova, and even says a few words about Judith. They talk for a long time about what they didn't know, what they will never know. They are silent for longer still.

In the space of ten days, the former county of HNV has become a necropolis. The necropolis of the Guardians of the Territory. And Yuri has become its guardian. He will watch over the dead, over the poisonous flora, and over the few manufactured vestiges of what this piece of the world was, when there was still a world.

October has begun, and it rains without stopping for weeks. The thin drizzle formed of slush and silica sometimes falls in pellets of hail, but except for a few variable jumps in intensity, the *icesand-rain* remains the same, perfectly constant, everywhere, for everyone. Except in the Sanctuary, protected by the Aleph, which receives only a few trailing wisps of cloud, peripheral hailstones, isolated elements.

Above what was once called the Independent Territory of Grand Junction, a large purple crow glides, an old bird native to the area, that has seen many things during its lifetime. Along with packs of wolves and wild dogs, it is the last living being to have seen the World of Before, the world before the neoecology of the *icesand*. It is even old enough to have seen the

World of Before the World of Before. It has seen everything it is possible to see with regard to the end of a species called Man.

The bird comes often to visit Yuri, who has been living alone in his cabin for months. The bird brings him silent news of the outside world. Anomanity now extends in an unbroken stretch from one end to the other of the globe. Humanity possesses nothing now but a single body; it speaks only a single language—a *nonlanguage*, in fact—the simple flux of undifferentiated organic information; it lives in a totally unified world, remade in its image. Here, in the Territory, and most probably in the whole of the American Northeast, he is the last man. He is protected by the transfinite point hidden in the Ridge, and by these purple crows that seem to want to outlive the neoecology of the Anome at all costs. The Territory-within-the-Territory is in itself a sort of Noah's Ark. The crows, and also the wolves, the lynxes, the deer, the foxes, and eventually the caribou come slowly, to repopulate the Sanctuary. The poisonous vegetation is growing everywhere once more; Yuri can again admire what once brought death, and what will inevitably cause death in the future to anyone who does not understand Territory flora. Its beauty is nothing if not more intense. This beauty that will survive him.

Everything will be all right.

Ω > *KNOCKIN' ON HEAVEN'S DOOR*

A man will rise/A man will fall/From the sheer face of love/ Like a fly
from a wall/It's no secret at all/Oh yeah, it's no secret that the stars are
falling from the sky/The universe exploding 'cause of one man's
lie/Look, I gotta go, yeah I'm running outta change/There's a lot of
things if I could I'd rearrange.
—U2, "THE FLY."

One day, Yuri McCoy dies. It is a very calm morning, much brighter than the norm, that meteorological homogeneity that now reigns completely over each stratum of the atmosphere. It is a morning of pale silvery glitter touched with gold and rose—the most beautiful morning, perhaps, that he has ever seen. A purple crow glides above the Sanctuary. That is what the Legend will say, in any case. The Legend will also say that he senses his old female companion from the Territory coming back toward him after decades of absence, and that he spends his last days preparing comfortably for the great voyage. Of course he knows that she doesn't exist. Death is nothing but an invention of men, used as a point for absolute, symbolic responsibility from the day one of them, the first one, realized that the man he had just killed disappeared from the timeline—because killing is precisely that, an abrupt ontological slash in the flux of memory and futures. Killing defines itself; it is the opposite of the creative Word, its shadow cast over the land of men.

* * *

Death was probably born with language. Symbols were needed, to facilitate the recording of this mysterious disappearance of the life flow to *somewhere else*. The first written languages were neither financial nor alchemical nor astronomical.

They were symbols written for the dead.

Death does not exist; it is only the simulacrum left by the organic flesh of the body, while the hidden luminous structure passes to another quantum level entirely. Death does not exist, and yet it reigned over humanity for millennia. Death does not exist, and yet the immortality now possessed by neohumanity resembles its permanent placement in the world.

It does not exist, but Yuri can smile at it. It is nothing, in the end, but a mundane optical illusion hiding the existence of another Vessel to Infinity. When his body is reborn, on the day of the Last Judgment, he will see Judith again, and all the Men of the Territory. All the Men of all the Territories.

In five or thirty thousand years—a few months, from her point of view as a Traveler in Infinity—Judith might find a few whitened bones in the sand, the last vestiges of what was once the body of animated flesh bearing the name Yuri McCoy.

Then, one day, she will die in her turn.

They will end by being reunited. The Grand Junction will take place where it is supposed to. Where everything is unified in the light of all infinities.

He has watched over the Territory for more than forty years. He has watched over the manuscript of its origins, and he has written the sequel, the story he has lived, and even the story of what will succeed him—that is, his prediction of the times to come. The manuscripts are stacked in his cabin, neatly stowed in munitions boxes, at the bottom of the crater. One day, a nonanomized man will pass through here. A man or a woman. He or she will continue the writing. He or she will die in his or her turn. Then another man, or another woman, will come. When the Library of the Vessel comes back, it will find its own image here; it will find what it sired in the brains of the few free men left on Earth.

Among the few books from the Library he keeps in his shelter, one text has often kept him company during the nights and days, the distant echo of a lost language-world; in *Protasis and Apodosis*, one Pierre Klossowski said this: *“Writing books goes back to telling the story of a voyage that will evoke the places visited. One can go there and yet not recognize the places according to my description. Others will describe them and they will not be the same places for all that. Whoever can discover in himself these same*

places makes my own description useless. My true ambition is only to find the right friends to occupy these same places, which will bring me the certainty that these places exist by themselves, and then I will stop writing. Because my friends and I will be the inhabitants of this place—we will make a habit of it.”

Not only could Yuri have written these words himself, but clearly he has lived them.

The transfinite point has secretly illuminated the Ridge since the day of the Great Transmigration. It is the Antenna. The other end of the supercord called Link de Nova, this Body-Vessel that will travel to the limits of space and time. Thanks to him, one day, the members of the Third Humanity will be able to come back to Earth, and to make the Territory the place of his Second Coming.

Anomanity, that parahumanity, that second and dual humanity, will probably reign for centuries, perhaps millennia. But Yuri knows that there will always be a handful of free men, scattered across the globe, and that some of them will pass through here one day.

The *Homo anomians* cannot get close to the place without suffering immediate death; it has always been that way. It is a taboo zone par excellence, the only place on Earth forbidden to them, where the desert of mud has made no inroads, where their organic network—immortality cannot incarnate. It is simple, in the end. Nothing escapes the Territory.

The Legend continues to live. Men are brought here by it. Men and women who reject the conditions dictated by neohumanity. They are rare. As far as one can tell when researching this part of the Territory, sometimes decades, even centuries, pass between two successive visits. But that does not keep the Legend from continuing to live. It does not keep the manuscripts from piling up in the munitions boxes, one after another. It does not ever keep the writing from taking the risk of existence.

The Legend says that one day, a long, long time after the mutant humanity has drowned in its own numeric mass, the man named Yuri McCoy puts his affairs in order so as to leave the Territory in the best possible condition for his potential successor. And it is said that his successor does the same thing when the time comes. And the one who succeeds the successor. And so on.

Until me. I, who am the last keeper of the Legend. I, who do not know where I come from, but who have always known that I will end my days

here. I, who am writing this story in the same cabin where Yuri McCoy lived, where the last men died so that the Third Humanity could depart for Infinity to prepare for the Coming of the End of Days. I am a Territory Man, too. I am the one who is writing, the one who is taking up the Legend to send it to another singularity, to another eye that will capture and record it, another voice that will transmit-illuminate it. I, who will die soon, in my turn, who will continue to write until my last breath; I, who have lived with them all this time, who have accompanied them secretly, these Men and these Women of the Territory; I, who have loved them though they didn't know me, who have written them without knowing them.

Yuri McCoy dies. He has been the last man in the Territory for a very long time. His memories go back to the time when Humanity still existed on this planet. Yuri McCoy dies. The poisonous plants of the Territory will serve as his burial shroud, in the brilliant variety of the multiform microjungles here, surrounded by the Desert-World.

Yuri McCoy dies. He instantly joins with the Infinite.

It is in writing these lines that I realize just how alive he is.

Just how completely he has conquered death.

Just how truly he is immortal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAURICE G. DANTEC was born in France in 1959. A former advertising executive and songwriter for a French punk-rock group,

Dantec is a shameless lover of science fiction, crime novels, and metaphysics. He is the author of *Red Siren*, which won France's Prix de l'Imaginaire. He is also the author of *Villa Vortex*, *Babylon Babies* (now a major motion picture from Fox under the title *Babylon A.D.*), and *Theatre of Operations*, a series of journal essays. He lives in Montreal.

Grand Junction is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A Del Rey Trade Paperback Original

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of
The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.,
New York.

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Originally published in French as *Grande Jonction* by Éditions Albin
Michel, Paris, France, in 2006.

eISBN: 978-0-345-51570-4

www.delreybooks.com

v3.0